RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Mentoring as a Form of Transformation in Academia

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Abstract

A considerable amount of literature has established the under-representation of Black women academics in South Africa and abroad. Several factors continue to contribute to the lack of transformation in most institutions of higher learning in the country. Despite this challenge, a number of women have managed to succeed irrespective of the institutional culture and structures of exclusion. This study explored literature on mentoring as a tool for Black African women and underrepresented minority groups within the academic space to enhance diversity, equality, and inclusion. The study has shown the impact of mentorship in giving women an opportunity to grow and advance within the academic space and the importance of representation.

Keywords: *African black women; diversity; inclusion; equality; transformation*

Introduction

Extant literature has established that Black African women are under-represented in academia in South Africa and abroad. Several factors contribute to the lack of transformation in most higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. Despite this challenge, several Black African women have managed to succeed regardless of the restrictive institutional culture and structures of exclusion. This study explored literature on mentoring as a tool for the retention and progression of Black African women academics in the higher education sector in South Africa, and as a way to foster diversity, equality, and inclusion. Critical consciousness theory was used as the analytical lens. The analysis illuminated the institutional and systematic structures of exclusion, racism, and sexism prevalent in HEIs, to which Black African women academics are exposed. A systematic review of literature that entailed a thorough search of electronic databases including EBSCOhost, Academic Search Complete, SocINDEX, Google Scholar, and Web of Science was conducted. The findings indicate that mentoring and professional networks can be more than just initiatives to promote the development and retention of Black African women academics, they can also be used to challenge and dismantle the prevalent culture in most HEIs in South Africa that continues to exclude women in academia, particularly Black African women.

For years, the academic space has been a White male-dominated environment where women academics have been significantly underrepresented in the structures of the academy, especially in senior positions and within certain disciplines (Whitten, 2016). The discrimination and marginalisation have resulted in women being excluded from networks that are imperative for their professional development as academics and have culminated in feelings of isolation, stress and exit from academia (Savigny, 2014). Despite numerous legislations and policies crafted to address this phenomenon, the issue remains largely unabated, particularly for Black African women. Minority and marginalised groups often suffer from restricted power due to the intersectionality of their race, gender, and social standing in society (Meschitti and Smith, 2017). Although all women experience forms of sexism, discrimination and exclusion, Black African women's experiences in academia are far worse compared to women of other races. Hence, this study identifies mentoring as a form of transformation in academia. Scholars such as Meschitti and Smith (2017) have reiterated the importance of mentoring as an important approach to enhance the professional development of women within the academic space while Hawkes (2012) addressed the implications of mentoring

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on the mentee's career trajectory. However, there is a dearth of literature that reflects on how mentoring can be used to drive the transformation agenda within the academic space, which is a gap that this study aims to fill.

Almost three decades post-apartheid South Africa, the representation of Black women (African, Indian and Coloured) in higher education institutions (HEIs) remains a challenge. Despite the South African Constitution (1996) recognising education as a fundamental human right, the marginalisation of Black women in academia is prevalent. Many scholars consider this marginalisation as a dual consequence of racism and patriarchy, deeply entrenched in South African societies because of colonisation and apartheid (Akala *et al*., 2016; Maodzwa-Taruvinga *et al*., 2014). Several universal statutes and legislative frameworks that South Africa has ratified have been universally adopted to ensure that all forms of violence and discrimination against women are eradicated in all parts of the world and sectors of society, business, and education. These include but are not limited to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1979, which serves as a bill of rights for all women globally, and the African Union Protocol established in 2003, which emphasises the need to eradicate gender-related inequalities (Badat, 2010). Despite these universal statutes and legislative frameworks, Black women, especially Black African women continue to experience gross levels of sexism, racism, and marginalisation within the academic space (Wallace *et al*., 2016). Black African women academics are the only group that performs emotional labour in academia (Wallace *et al*., 2016). As academics, Black African women experience moral pressure, they are compelled to engage in care labour to the working-class students whose experience of marginalisation is similar to theirs – a form of labour that is invisible, unrecognised, and unpaid (Magoqwana *et al*., 2019). This perpetuates the notion of Black women, especially Black African women academics being mere caretakers and 'nannies' in academia rather than qualified and capable knowledge producers like their male counterparts (Letsebe, 2022).

During the apartheid era in South Africa, the oppression and dehumanisation of Black African women by the racist, White supremacist regime were systematic and horrific (Maodzwa-Taruvinga and Divala, 2014). For the longest time, Black African women have been dehumanised and viewed as insignificant, possessing no fundamental contributions in the social, political, and economic spheres of society (Naicker, 2012). After the watershed 1994 democratic election, the ANC-led government undertook major reforms across all the fundamental aspects of human existence to change the racialised and gendered work landscape and knowledge production (Ramohai and Khomotso, 2016). Thus, post-apartheid South Africa shifted from the deconstruction to the reconstruction of Black women, to redress the inequalities of the past, and restore the dignity of Black women (Ramohai, 2019). Some of these reforms include affirmative action laws that have been in place since 1999 and the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998, which aims to promote fair treatment among employees and the provision for equal opportunities in the workplace and redress the diversity of historical disadvantages. However, scholars such as Mokhele (2013) argue that affirmative action has been largely ineffective. Reforms that were implemented in the higher education landscape were driven by the mandate to increase Black women's access to higher education as staff and students (HESA, 2014). The transformation of gender representation in universities is vital in that it transcends students' demographics to the university staff. Further, it seeks to achieve institutional balance in terms of gender. However, many HEIs still trail behind in terms of implementing the required organisational changes in this regard. Even though considerable changes have been made and are somewhat effective, Black African women academics continue to experience isolation, exclusion, and marginalisation. The image of most universities in the South African context remains Eurocentric and is not transformed, therefore, it does not work, nor does it represent the country's demographic structure.

Black African Women Academics in South Africa's Higher Education Institutions

In South Africa, men have continued to dominate high-ranking academic positions in higher education institutions. Most of these high-ranking academics are White males by comparison to Black African academics (DHET, 2018). The statistical evidence produced by the Commission for Gender Equality seems to confirm these sentiments when it revealed that at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, male academics are three times more the number of female academics and there are twice as many men in top management as there are women. This is against the backdrop of the university producing 9 000 more female graduates than males yearly (Mhlanga, 2013). The underrepresentation of women and producing more female graduates has not resulted in the retention of women academics within the academic space, particularly in the top management positions where power is exercised, and decisions are made. Thus, the change project to transform and include the previously excluded groups within South African universities, which emphasised the equitable representation of women of colour and Black African women

in academia has been slow. The call for change is premised on the understanding that higher education plays a central role in enhancing gender equality. Further, women's access to higher education increases opportunities and offers a different voice to academia (Letsebe, 2022).

Despite the numerous inclusive policies and legislative frameworks that have enabled staff and students from diverse backgrounds, races, and socioeconomic standings to attain postgraduate qualifications, the resilience and legacy of colonialism and apartheid persist in HEIs decades after the advent of the democratic dispensation (Mohope, 2014). Leathwood (2017) argues that removing barriers to access to higher education is not sufficient to address the scourge of discrimination in HEIs. Instead, there should be deliberate, tailored restructuring efforts to transform such spaces so that they accommodate diverse bodies. Apart from sporadic successful stories of Black African women in academia, discrimination, sexism, and racism persists unabated (Mohope, 2014). Even though women generally experience a wide range of issues within academia, Black African women endure racism, sexism, exclusion, and other forms of discrimination at an alarmingly higher rate than other women (Mohope, 2014). Research has shown that racism and endemic structures in higher education continue to marginalise Black people, particularly Black African female academics (Letsebe, 2022). Black African female academics face more barriers in terms of their success and professional socialisation within the academic space than their White counterparts, resulting in dual oppression-racism on the one hand, and sexism on the other hand (Zulu, 2021). Black African women academics in historically White universities are often the minority, isolated and marginalised, and their voices are often silenced (Mohope, 2014). Black bodies are considered "aliens" and "invaders" in historically White universities, which results in their competence and authority being questioned (Kiguwa, 2019). Black African women academics are often infantilised, treated as juniors irrespective of their academic qualifications and they are often denied the opportunity for creative intellectual input (Khunou *et al.*, 2019). This continued entrenched discrimination has been deliberately institutionalised to protect and serve the supremacy of the White man within the academic space (Zulu, 2021). Those who have been resilient in the face of adversity and are part of the small cohort that has reached the 'promised land', still face adversities from within, and endure the detrimental effects of their success and progress as academics. Joubert and Guenther (2017) found that out of 211 academics considered active scientists in South Africa, only 17% were Black women compared to 78% white people. Although this may be a result of the challenge of access to academic opportunities, it also highlights the possible lack of guidance and mentorship that Black African women academics may not be exposed to in ensuring that they receive sufficient assistance to become knowledge producers.

Women encounter numerous challenges throughout their academic careers that include decreased recognition in publications, fewer citations, lower research funding allocations, and increased academic and domestic responsibilities mostly because of entrenched institutional disparities (Salinas *et al.*, 2020). These prejudices cause a lack of ethnic and gender diversity in academia, especially at the upper levels (Mhlanga, 2013). Different authors and literature suggest several policies, programmes and strategies through which these issues can be effectively addressed and retention of talent and advancement of women within academia could be effectively achieved (Deanna *et al.*, 2022; Thomas *et al.*, 2015). Evidence presented in this study seems to suggest that mentoring may play a pivotal role in the career advancement and retention of women academics and Black African academics, in general. Mentoring has the potential to transform the academic space that is currently characterised by the persistent institutional culture of sexism, racism, and exclusion. This argument is premised on evidence from various studies (Deanna *et al.*, 2022, Salinas *et al.*, 2020). These studies have suggested that some challenges that are experienced by women academics within the academic space are premised on the scarcity of mentoring and networking programmes in universities. Thus, mentoring can be a form of transformation in HEIs if Black African women academics who have been previously excluded, are given support, guidance, and skills that will enhance their professional development and access to relevant networks that go beyond supervision. This may lead to institutional change, dismantle the culture of exclusion, and lead to the progression and retention of Black African women academics in the academic space. While the underrepresentation of Black African women is not directly caused by the lack of mentoring per se, the argument is that mentoring plays a pivotal role in the professional development and building of networks for academics – which is important in academic spaces.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness originates from the ideas of Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire. It involves both reflection and action that seeks to promote transformation and systematic societal changes (Freire, 2005). Freire believed that the marginalised should have a critical understanding of the history, exploitation, poverty, oppression, and

inequality to which they are subjected, for them to effectively resist these oppressive systems and transform their political and socio-economic conditions (Christens *et al*., 2016; Freire, 2005). Critical consciousness acknowledges the existence of social injustices and views oppression as both a state and a process that exacerbates the unequal distribution of power and resources, which negatively affects the quality of life of the poor and marginalised (Christens *et al*., 2016). This theory is relevant to this study as it acknowledges the existence of oppressive social systems that perpetuate the subordination of the marginalised and alienates them from the structures of power and decision-making. The theory can be used to analyse the institutional and systematic structures of exclusion, racism and sexism that exist in South African HEIs to which Black African women academics are exposed. Black African women academics in South Africa endure various forms of oppression and exclusion in HEIs. Critical consciousness is appropriate in several ways. Firstly, the theory acknowledges the existence of oppressive structures in most HEIs. Secondly, it can be appropriated by Black African women academics to resist the unjust systems and implement progressive change that will promote transformation in South Africa's HEIs. This could potentially result in the retention of Black African women academics in HEIs. Being critically aware of their oppression, and a clear understanding of the intersectionality of race and gender can give Black African women academics the urge to intentionally resist oppressive structures, resulting in the transformation of HEIs. Mentoring can provide the opportunity for Black African women academics to reflect and engage in discussions about the oppressive structures within which they operate. This could further conscientize them about the forms of oppression they experience and present an opportunity for them to resist these systems, enabling them to remain in the higher education system and further their careers.

Methodology

Extant literature on mentoring as a tool for empowering Black African women academics aimed to contextualise the study's inquiry within the existing body of knowledge on the topic. A thorough search on electronic databases including EBSCOhost (which is a platform that hosts several databases that include Academic Search Complete and SocINDEX), Google Scholar, and Web of Science. Keywords were used to retrieve the articles that reflect on the role of mentoring in supporting Black African women academics, with a particular emphasis on promoting diversity, equality, and inclusion. These keywords were modified and combined based on a specific area of interest. They included: mentoring; black African women; underrepresented minority groups; diversity; equality; inclusion, higher education, academic space; student support; career development; minority empowerment; mentoring programs; mentoring outcomes; success factors; barriers and challenges; and intersectionality. A total of 93 articles were chosen for review, and priority was given to peer-reviewed, full-text research papers published in English between 2013 and 2023. EndNote software was used to exclude publications that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Efforts to eliminate bias involved scanning the abstract and subheadings, which were done by two different researchers. The literature research was based on developing and semi-developed countries from around the world to cover a wider range of literature without excluding any region. To evaluate the quality and credibility of the reviewed literature, guidelines provided by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) were used as tools for critical appraisal. Therefore, the analysis method was synthesising the literature to generate findings, which were categorised into themes namely mentoring programmes, diverse and inclusive mentoring, professional networking opportunities for women, and the potential of multi-mentor systems to improve retention, and diversity, equality, and inclusion.

Findings and Discussion

Mentoring is considered in the context of institutional change that can enhance the academic careers of black African women, who for decades have been historically marginalised and excluded (Thomas *et al*., 2015). Extant literature points to a lack of consistency or a universal definition of mentoring, as the word means different things to different organisations, scholars, and disciplines (Baker, 2015). Some scholars have described mentoring as a set of activities led by the mentor, as a process, and as part of strategic work (Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017). In this paper, mentoring is conceptualised as a powerful development intervention that aims to support, assist and guide developing relationships established in the context of a formal mentorship between a mentee (emerging black African women academic) and mentor (experienced and higher-ranking black African women academic) (Chitsamatanga *et al*., 2018). Generally, mentorship has been considered an effective tool to promote the development and retention of employees across the spectrum. Employees that undergo mentorship tend to experience high levels of self-efficacy, are more productive, and often excel in their jobs as compared to those who do not (Friedman *et al*., 2021). Moreover, effective mentoring necessitates a special interpersonal connection

between people in various professional phases, with the ability to develop both the mentor's and the mentee's careers (Kalbfleisch and Keyton, 2016).

Within the academic setting, mentoring does not only offer templates of the requisite behaviour to succeed in academia, but it also offers professional support, direction, knowledge, and advice (Montgomery and Page, 2018). However, mentoring is also an important ingredient in the professional development of junior academics and the well-being of the institution as a system. Well-established mentoring programmes can save HEIs start-up costs by increasing retention rates and keeping accomplished senior-staff members as mentors (Montgomery and Page, 2018). Having good mentors can increase junior academic members' job satisfaction, assist them to comprehend the unwritten rules of academia, and eventually raise their productivity (Bilimoria and Liang, 2014). Hence, various institutions from around the world have created automatic mentor assignments and women mentoring women networks, which have significantly changed the academic landscape in other universities and enriched them (Hlengwa, 2020; Kent *et al*., 2013). The mentoring of junior academics in disciplines where women academics constitute a minority may ensure that junior women academics are not lost but are retained and integrated within their respective faculties and professions.

Even though mentoring programmes and strategies such as those that offer one-on-one mentoring between junior women academic and more experienced peers inside and outside the field can yield positive outcomes, their typical mentoring approach may not be sufficient to ensure the retention, success, and well-being of underrepresented groups by either race/ethnicity or gender identity in academia (Kent *et al*., 2013). The South African academic landscape reflects these characteristics which culminate in mentoring in HEIs being superficial, and only existing theoretically and not practically (Socratous, 2018). Several scholars have elucidated that transformation in higher education is a complex process across different contexts (CHE, 2015), and therefore cannot be understood as a universal term that applies to all the HEIs, since each has its own unique social and academic dynamics that require contextually based solutions (Ramohai, 2019). Furthermore, Hlengwa (2020) argued that mentoring in historically White universities has not been an effective tool for transformation, mostly because initiatives such as The New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) have resulted in situations where the mentee (a black academic) is mentored by a senior (White) academic, that does not understand the intersectional challenges of race, class, gender, and language dynamics experienced by the mentee and who is likely to perpetuate notions of "Whiteness" – thereby undermining the transformation agenda.

To counteract the deficiencies of standardised approaches to mentoring that are aloof to the particularities of different contexts, a network of diverse mentors is proposed. The achievement of long-term career goals, development, and retention of both mentors and mentees may be supported by a network of diverse mentors, which would enhance DEI activities and sustain a positive cycle of enhanced mentoring (Deanna, 2022). Programmes that emphasise the development of diverse mentorship networks have been successful in fostering the achievement of women in the field of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) (Womack, 2020). The network of diverse mentorship, which encourages cross-cultural mentoring relationships and incorporates various strategies to encourage mentors' knowledge, sensitivity, and dedication to their mentees, has achieved significant success within underrepresented groups. Within the South African context, institutions can effectively promote diversity, equality, and inclusion and combat bias in academia through improving culturally and socially diverse mentorship. Currently, most HEIs in South Africa have developed initiatives aimed at boosting diversity, equality, and inclusion; however, implementing these initiatives is no easy feat. Hence, it is recommended that institutions must strive to achieve the following objectives: (i) emphasise mentoring strategies to increase diversity, equality, and inclusion, particularly those that address gender bias and exclusion; (ii) promote multi-mentor programmes and acknowledge their value in increasing diversity, equality, and inclusion; and (iii) provide examples of diverse, institutional mentoring efforts (Deanna, 2022).

In academia, networking is crucial for positioning oneself for peer reviews as well as for identifying colleagues who may serve as co-authors and research partners. The importance of men's networking endeavours, which are regarded as essential components of, and contributors to the "boys' club" culture is documented (Diezmann *et al*., 2019). Some of the activities include going to conferences, attending social gatherings, watching sporting events, going on hunting trips, going to strip clubs, drinking at bars, and playing sports, particularly golf (Diezmann *et al*., 2019). Scholars contend that even in the presence of formal regulations that explicitly forbid gender discrimination, there may be many systemic impediments to women's advancement within a profession when men frequently engage in boys' club practices like these, and they have consequences for gender disparities in different

professions including academia (Murphy *et al*., 2022). However, the difficult part is that these professional interactions take place outside the purview of formal work sites and professional work practices (Murphy *et al*., 2022).

Women have made attempts to address their exclusion by using the same networking strategies, but they have encountered limitations. These limitations mostly emanate from a shortage of women colleagues in professions where there are already insufficient women to take up the roles of mentors. Other women have reported being overwhelmed by a sense of isolation precipitated by a lack of community with other women (Murphy *et al*., 2022). The challenges have rendered women's academics powerless and incapacitated them from having any significant contributions to their advancement. Diezmann *et al*. (2019) have argued that because of the unfavourable power structures in academia, women have struggled to attain promotion and secure senior positions of influence. Despite these challenges, Murphy *et al*. (2022) suggest that women must create women-oriented informal professional networking clubs or organisations in the form of women's leadership groups that advocate for women's academic development within their institutions rather than simply assembling to share their issues of concern. An example of a women's professional network group that has gained attraction over the years is the Women's Academics Forum at Yale University, which promotes gender equality throughout the institution and stimulates communication and networking among females in the faculty, administrators, students, and alumnae. This approach may be adapted, and pilot tested within the South African context to advance the matters of diversity, equality, and inclusion within academia.

Mentors and mentees involved cannot be divorced from their cultural and socioeconomic contexts for mentorship to have an impact on academic achievement. Unconscious biases are frequently displayed in the pairing of mentors and mentees (Malone and Sydney, 2021). For instance, literature posits that mentors from the majority culture interact with mentees who share their ethnicity, religion, or gender in ways that reflect majority-culture priorities rather than tailoring mentoring to these underrepresented minority mentees' priorities (Malone *et al*., 2021). Therefore, we argue that institutions must make deliberate attempts to address systemic injustices. The development of mentorship initiatives may increase the potential for both mentors and mentees to be more productive and innovative especially when they are formalised as programmes (Malone and Sydney, 2021). For instance, women typically spend a greater proportion of their time than men doing mentoring and teaching. This disparity may lower publication throughput and overall success, which therefore plays a part in the disproportionate attrition of female mentors. Additionally, if women and underrepresented minority groups are underrepresented in advanced career stages, it affects the availability of diverse mentors, which puts even more pressure on the few mentors who are already accessible. It is difficult for those few women and underrepresented minorities who are kept long enough to become mentors to overcome mentorship and research biases when there is a pyramidal structure that favours reduced representation of women and underrepresented minority groups in senior positions (Kalbfleisch and Cody, 2013).

Promoting mentoring networks, which involve numerous mentor-mentee ties, is one way to improve group performance by maximising resources (Womack *et al*., 2020; Woolley *et al*., 2016). Mentorship goes beyond the connections between mentors and their immediate mentees in productive mentoring networks. Mentors can be specifically chosen outside of the mentee's immediate advisory network. Thus, many programmes frequently focus on matching mentor/mentee couples, creating a multi-mentor network, which is an emergent aspect of other existing systems. Such programmes usually provide the opportunity to form peer and group mentoring relationships, creating networks for people in both similar and different professional stages (Woolley *et al*., 2016). To encourage and credit mentors who participate in a variety of mentoring programmes, institutional policies can, for instance, establish review and promotion guidelines and responsibility re-allocation to lessen the overburden of mentoring by women and other underrepresented minority groups. While certain solutions are universal, each institution has its own set of problems that call for distinct solutions. Even the best solutions can fail if these problems are not addressed in local contexts, even though doing so is difficult. To guarantee that institutions evaluate successful or unsuccessful actions dynamically and responsively, efforts and programmes must also be regularly monitored and evaluated for their techniques and results once they have been established.

The South African government has taken several steps to develop legislative frameworks and inclusive policies to support black African women in academia. Some of the key initiatives emphasised the need to redress historical disparities, promote the participation of women and gender-sensitive policies (Ndlovu, 2014; Letsebe, 2022). However, it is important to note that while these initiatives represent significant progress, there is still work to be

done to fully achieve gender equality and inclusion in South Africa's HEIs. Concerted efforts are required to address the barriers and challenges faced by black African women in academia. The buffer to the implementation of progressive legislative frameworks and policies to integrate black African women in academics is the institutional culture in some HEIs that prevent their implementation (Zulu, 2021). Therefore, women and underrepresented minority groups can immensely benefit from policy reforms and the implementation of programmes that support strong, varied mentorship networks in achieving their full potential within the academic space. In this regard, mentorship becomes an imperative step in ensuring that black African women academics are fully integrated into the academic space and professional socialisation. Even though mentorship plays a significant role in enhancing diversity, equality, and inclusion; HEI still treat mentorship, leadership, and career development initiatives as insignificant programmes and not worthy of being adequately funded, resulting in poor funding for these programmes (Deanna *et al.*, 2022). For instance, many institutions in resource-constrained countries including South Africa, lack the necessary resources to successfully navigate the mentoring process, build positive relationships with their mentors or mentees, or even have a resource they can turn to if challenging circumstances arise, aside from collaboration groups or a few institutional efforts (Ssemata *et al.*, 2017). These challenges further highlight the importance of establishing mentorship programmes and supporting them with the necessary resources for effective outcomes.

Moreover, a diverse work environment to provide support to mentorship programmes must be established. Such an establishment enhances the opportunities for everyone involved, enhances the working and learning environments for the individuals involved, adds new insights to academic spaces and improves the quality of research. To do this, we encourage all the relevant organisations, foundations, institutions, and societies to draw inspiration from the many current initiatives that have successfully created effective mentoring relationships within their spheres of influence. The practicality of this will benefit black African women academics, especially those who are new to the academic spaces and who still need to be provided with effective mentoring. A conducive environment must be created, and it must be consciously biased towards building black African women academics' intellectual and research capabilities, enabling them to thrive and attain high-ranking positions drawing from professionals from all backgrounds, and generating a positive mentoring loop for future generations instead of an environment that sidelines and leaves them to manoeuvre the heavily patriarchal and Eurocentric HEIs.

Peer mentoring can be used as a form of integration in academia, in a way that black African women academics mentor one another, share experiences and identify ways in which they can tackle the suppressive and excluding institutional structures. It is envisaged that black women academics will acknowledge that their challenges are structural and not unique, creating a platform where they can support one another and work collectively in dismantling the oppressive structures in academia as a way of conscientizing themselves. Furthermore, this will lead to the inclusion of more black African women academics into academia. The call is also for the formalisation of mentorship in HEIs. Black African women in higher positions in academia, along with other willing academics (irrespective of race and gender), especially black African women academics must create vibrant professional networks to provide intentional and meaningful mentoring to those who are new to academia. In IsiZulu there is a phrase that says *Indlela ubuzwa kwabaphambili,* which simply means that the experienced ones can give the best counsel to novices. Using this idiomatic expression as a guide might help role players in higher education to create a safe space in which black African women share their experiences, develop, learn, challenge, and dismantle problematic institutional culture, and ultimately find strength and support resulting in the increased retention of black African women academics.

Conclusion

There is sufficient South African literature on mentoring women academics, as a means of socialising scholars into their respective disciplines, academic development, and retainment. However, there is minimal literature that focuses on how mentorship of black African women academics can be used as a tool for transforming the academic landscape in South Africa. Little is said about how mentorship can be used to challenge notions of exclusion, and inequality. The reviewed literature highlights how mentoring connections and professional networks are essential for the success, retention, and general well-being of black African women academics. A network of varied mentors may help both mentors and mentees to develop in their careers and keep them there, thereby advancing the South African transformation agenda for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Thus, mentoring and professional networks can be more than just initiatives promoting the development and retention of black women in academia, they can also be used to

challenge and dismantle the prevalent culture in HEIs in South Africa that has persistently excluded women in academia, particularly black African women.

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