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Breaking through the ivory ceiling: stories of early-career women academics navigating higher education's demands

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Abstract

Purpose – Early-career women academics (ECWAs) in South Africa face distinct challenges in higher education, particularly across four key performance areas: teaching, research, community engagement and academic citizenship. While institutional transformation initiatives have increased women's representation in higher education institutions (HEIs), the unique experiences of ECWAs remain underexplored. This study aims to examine the societal and structural inequities that hinder ECWAs' ability to navigate academic demands effectively.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is grounded in role conflict theory, which explores the stress and tension arising from competing role expectations. A qualitative research design is adopted, employing a duo-ethnographic approach, a collaborative and dialogic methodology that enables researchers to engage in reflective narratives and co-construct meaning through personal experiences and interactions.

Findings – The study highlights how ECWAs experience role conflict due to the intersection of academic responsibilities, societal expectations and institutional pressures. These competing roles contribute to professional stress, hinder career progression and, in many cases, lead to burnout. The findings emphasise the need for supportive institutional structures to alleviate these pressures.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the limited scholarship on ECWAs by providing an in-depth exploration of the gendered dimensions of early-career academic experiences in South Africa. By employing a duo-ethnographic approach, this study offers a unique, reflective insight into the lived realities of ECWAs. The paper advocates for the voices of the ECWA and institutional reforms that promote equity, inclusivity and holistic support to ensure their well-being and career sustainability in academia.

Keywords Early-career women academics (ECWAs), Teaching, Research, Community engagement, Academic citizenship, Role conflict

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Early-career women academics (ECWAs) are an increasing demographic in South Africa's higher education institutions (HEIs), driven by gender transformation policies (Myende and Nkosi, 2024; Molelekeng, 2020). However, they continue to face challenges in teaching, research, community engagement and academic citizenship due to societal expectations and systemic inequities (Nguyen and Levkoff, 2020; Allen *et al.*, 2021). Using role conflict theory, this study examines how ECWAs navigate contradictory institutional demands, excessive workloads and exclusion from research opportunities (Myende and Nkosi, 2024; Kelly *et al.*, 2021). These challenges are rooted in historical patriarchal structures that have long limited women's participation in academia (Galizzi *et al.*, 2024). While progress has been made, ECWAs still struggle with institutional policies, tenure expectations and administrative burdens, all of which hinder their research productivity and career progression (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Myende and Nkosi, 2024; Yin and Mu, 2023).

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A key issue is the gendered nature of academic labour, where ECWAs bear disproportionate emotional labour in teaching, mentoring and student support while also facing exclusion from research networks and funding opportunities (Kelly *et al.*, 2021; Hlatshwayo and Majozi, 2024). Societal expectations regarding caregiving further complicate their professional advancement (Nguyen and Levkoff, 2020; Myende and Nkosi, 2024). Despite these barriers, ECWAs demonstrate resilience through interdisciplinary research, mentorship and advocacy to challenge systemic inequities (Yin and Mu, 2023).

However, their contributions remain undervalued within traditional academic reward structures (Kelly *et al.*, 2021; Allen *et al.*, 2021). The struggles of ECWAs must be understood within broader development agendas, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the African Union's Agenda 2063 and South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP). They all emphasise gender equality and the need for inclusive educational and professional environments (Ufomba, 2020; Odera and Mulusa, 2020).

To address these challenges, this study calls for targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs, equitable workload distribution and policies that recognise the intersection of gender and academic labour. Creating a more supportive academic environment is essential for achieving equity, inclusion and excellence in higher education (Salmi and D'Addio, 2021; Rosa and Clavero, 2022).

Problem statement

While existing research highlights structural and cultural barriers facing women academics in South Africa, the lived experiences of ECWAs remain under-explored as a distinct group (Myende and Nkosi, 2024; Allen *et al.*, 2021). Many studies generalise across women's experiences in academia, failing to account for how career stage, race, intersectionality and institutional context alter those experiences (Schultz and Rankhumise, 2023; Keiller and Dreyer, 2024).

There is a lack of narrative research exploring how ECWAs interpret and navigate their academic journeys. Van Dalen (2021), using latent class analysis, reveals distinct divisions among economists shaped by the pressures of the publish-or-perish culture. Yet, such analyses often fail to consider how these performance-driven dynamics intersect with gendered experiences (Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo, 2023). Similarly, broader qualitative research during COVID-19 demonstrates how women academics absorbed additional emotional and care responsibilities, intensifying role conflicts; yet, it seldom distinguishes ECWAs (Bam *et al.*, 2024). ECWAs face complex, overlapping pressures on research productivity, teaching, institutional engagement and emotional labour. Student expectations for nurturing roles compound teaching load and hinder equitable recognition (Denker, 2009; Hollywood *et al.*, 2020).

Structural barriers like inadequate mentorship and delayed progression are especially acute for Black ECWAs (Biljohn *et al.*, 2024). Theoretical framing through role conflict illuminates how ECWAs simultaneously navigate contradictory demands: research output, teaching excellence, service to institution and/or community and caregiving. These tensions are intensified for Black ECWAs due to intersecting expectations of care, cultural obligations and historical inequities (Denker, 2009).

Building on broader gender equity aims of the SDGs, African Union Agenda 2063 and South Africa's NDP, the study foregrounds ECWAs' voices to reveal how their struggles and strategies vary by identity and institutional context (Muleya, 2017; Keiller and Dreyer, 2024; Ufomba, 2020; Odera and Mulusa, 2020). This study adopts an intersectional perspective to explore how ECWAs navigate overlapping pressures associated with gender, career stage and institutional hierarchies. Intersectionality here captures how multiple, interconnected aspects of identity shape women's experiences of academic life.

Research question

What unique challenges do ECWAs face across the core performance areas of higher education?

Literature review

Gender dynamics in academia shape the experiences, opportunities and challenges of ECWAs. These dynamics influence career progression, representation and institutional policies. The literature identifies several key themes, including the glass ceiling, publishing pressures, impostor syndrome and systemic barriers. It also highlights the importance of resilience and the development of social capital as strategies for navigating these challenges.

Glass ceiling effect

The glass ceiling continues to limit women's progress into senior academic roles, even when they meet all requirements (Clavero and Galligan, 2021). In South African universities, leadership positions remain male-dominated, with few visible female role models (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016; Maheshwari, 2023). Institutional norms often reflect outdated gender roles and neoliberal values that favour men's advancement (Casad *et al.*, 2021; Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo, 2023). Many women hesitate to speak up in professional spaces due to fears of being seen as too aggressive or unfeminine (Herbst, 2020; Aiston and Fo, 2021). This contributes to low self-confidence and further reduces women's access to leadership roles (Chitsamatanga and Rembe, 2019).

Even those who break through often feel isolated in male-dominated environments. Most research in this area focuses on senior women academics, ignoring the experiences of ECWAs. Few studies explore how career stage, gender and institutional norms intersect to shape their leadership trajectories. This study addresses that gap by centring ECWAs' narratives. It highlights their resilience and everyday strategies for coping with exclusion. By doing so, it challenges dominant deficit-based frameworks and calls for more inclusive leadership development approaches.

Publishing demands

The pressure to publish is central to academic success under the publish-or-perish system (Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo, 2023). Publishing is closely tied to promotion, funding and institutional ranking (Jørgensen and Hanssen, 2018; Müller *et al.*, 2023). For early-career academics, this often leads to stress and high rejection rates (Fox Tree and Vaid, 2022). ECWAs face additional challenges, including balancing publishing with caregiving responsibilities and gendered expectations at home. The motherhood penalty further impacts their productivity, especially in the first decade after childbirth (Ceci *et al.*, 2023; Morgan *et al.*, 2021; Myende and Nkosi, 2024). Some ECWAs prioritise teaching over research, which is often undervalued in institutional metrics (Matthews *et al.*, 2014). Others overwork to meet performance demands, which increases stress and reduces family time (Müller *et al.*, 2023).

In addition, they often take on invisible academic labour, such as student support and committee work, that goes unrecognised in performance evaluations (Magoqwana *et al.*, 2019). While there is literature on publishing pressures, few studies focus on how these pressures intersect with gendered roles in the lives of ECWAs. This study fills that gap by using narrative methods to explore ECWAs' lived experiences. It shows how they negotiate, resist or reframe the pressures of academic publishing. The findings advocate for gender-sensitive evaluation policies and flexible workload models in academia.

The impostor phenomenon

Impostor syndrome, defined as the internalised fear of being exposed as intellectually fraudulent despite clear evidence of competence (Clance and Imes, 1978), remains a persistent issue among ECWA. In higher education, it is sustained by performance-driven cultures that equate worth with productivity and visibility. The publish-or-perish environment heightens anxiety and self-doubt, according to Heslop *et al*. (2023) and Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo (2023). In particular, ECWAs are balancing academic performance with gendered and familial expectations. Muradoglu *et al.* (2022) link impostor feelings to gendered stereotypes that question women's competence and legitimacy.

This reinforces hierarchical norms within academia as ECWAs often internalise these judgements. They lead to overwork and emotional exhaustion as they strive to prove themselves within masculinised cultures of excellence. Escobar-Soler *et al*. (2023) propose individual coping mechanisms such as mentoring and self-affirmation, while others emphasise systemic responses that address institutional bias and exclusion. Collectively, this literature demonstrates that impostor syndrome is both structural and cultural. It stems from neoliberal productivity pressures and gendered norms of competence.

However, few studies examine how these forces interact in postcolonial contexts of gender inequality, such as South Africa. Addressing this gap requires recognising impostorism not as personal weakness but as a product of entrenched academic inequities that shape ECWAs' experiences of belonging and legitimacy.

Systemic barriers and epistemic oppression

Systemic barriers in higher education are sustained by neoliberal values, gendered hierarchies and male-dominated institutional cultures. Neoliberalism reshapes universities into competitive markets, where success is tied to measurable outputs such as publications, grants and rankings (Allen *et al*., 2021; Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo, 2023; Teise and Teise, 2025). This emphasis marginalises forms of labour that cannot be easily quantified, such as mentoring, emotional support and community work tasks disproportionately carried by ECWAs (Magoqwana *et al*., 2019; Biljohn *et al*., 2024). Gendered power structures reinforce these inequities. Leadership and research networks remain male-dominated, privileging assertive and competitive behaviours while undervaluing collaboration and care (Casad *et al*., 2021; Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016; Galizzi *et al*., 2024).

Women's scholarship, particularly in the areas of gender and social justice, is often devalued, reflecting ongoing epistemic exclusion (Maheshwari, 2023; Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo, 2023). Neoliberal and patriarchal logics intersect to normalise overwork, isolation and self-blame among ECWAs, framing structural inequality as personal failure (Yin and Mu, 2023). Although equity policies exist, they rarely transform institutional cultures or redistribute power (Badat, 2008; Clavero and Galligan, 2021; Mkhize, 2022). Studies show that these reforms remain symbolic, while racial and gender hierarchies persist (Schultz and Rankhumise, 2023; Biljohn *et al*., 2024). Real transformation requires recognising care, collaboration and inclusivity as legitimate measures of academic excellence.

Building social capital and resilience

Research emphasises the importance of social capital and support systems in advancing ECWAs' careers. In this study, social capital refers to the professional networks, mentorship relations and collaborative partnerships that enable ECWAs to access resources, visibility and career advancement opportunities (Beech and Norris, 2018; Heffernan, 2021). These networks are essential for navigating structural inequities and institutional gatekeeping. On one hand, mentorship and collaboration are shown to enhance confidence and opportunities (Beech and Norris, 2018; Chitsamatanga *et al*., 2018; Aprile *et al*., 2021). On the other hand, studies such as Chitsamatanga and Rembe (2019) suggest ECWAs must work beyond official hours to

succeed, normalising overwork as resilience. While Bonache *et al*. (2022) and Sallee *et al*. (2016) stress the protective role of family support in mitigating work–family conflict, Boamah *et al*. (2022) caution that excessive workload ultimately leads to burnout. These contrasting perspectives position resilience either as a collective resource (mentorship, networks and family support) or as an individualised burden (extended working hours). Yet, little research examines how ECWAs themselves reconcile these contradictory pressures, particularly within South Africa's neoliberal university context. Taken together, existing scholarship demonstrates that ECWAs face impostorism, systemic barriers and contradictory expectations of resilience.

However, most studies address these themes in isolation or focus broadly on women academics without attention to early-career positionality and intersectionality in the Global South. Thus, although scholarship has addressed early-career academics broadly, the unique intersectional experiences of ECWAs remain under-explored, justifying the present study. This study employs intersectionality to examine how overlapping social identities, particularly gender, race and academic ranks shape ECWAs' experiences. This lens reveals that systemic inequities are not merely gendered but are compounded by racial and institutional hierarchies that influence access to mentorship, recognition and career progression (Crenshaw, 1989; Kenny and Davids, 2022).

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in role conflict theory, first developed by Kahn *et al*. (1964). The theory provides a lens for understanding the numerous challenges faced by ECWAs in South African HEIs. Kahn *et al*. (1964) explain that when individuals face incompatible demands across or within their roles, tension and stress often follow. Such conflict can lead to emotional strain and lower performance, reflecting the daily realities of ECWAs balancing multiple responsibilities. While intersectionality is often applied to examine race and gender, in this study, it is extended to the intersections between gender, career stage and institutional positioning.

This adaptation allows for a nuanced analysis of how systemic expectations and power relations create compounded challenges for ECWAs. Precisely, inter-role conflict arises when competing obligations, such as academic duties and family responsibilities, create tension (Lawrason *et al*., 2020). This compels individuals to prioritise one role at the expense of the other, often leading to stress, whereas Kiral and Karabacak (2020) posit that the intra-sender conflict occurs when conflicting demands emanate from a single authority figure. For instance, the expectation to excel simultaneously in research productivity and administrative tasks generates frustration and hampers career progression. Based on Merton's (1957) conceptualisation of role sets, Kahn *et al*.'s role episode model elucidates how ECWAs interpret and negotiate these competing demands from diverse stakeholders. Empirical evidence indicates that ECWAs frequently experience inter-role conflict due to their simultaneous commitments to teaching, research, administration and family care. This often necessitates extended working hours and contributes to exhaustion and work-life imbalance (Awais *et al*., 2021; Sun *et al*., 2011; Schulz, 2013).

The persistence of traditional gender norms exacerbates this burden, as women disproportionately shoulder domestic responsibilities, thereby constraining their academic career advancement (Palomino and Frezatti, 2016). Moreover, intra-sender conflicts intensify these pressures when the performance management contracts impose contradictory expectations, such as demanding excellence in both pedagogy and research output (Kelly *et al*., 2021). Additional dimensions of role conflict, inter-sender and person-role conflicts, emerge when institutional imperatives clash with societal norms, further intensifying stress and attrition among ECWAs (Sun *et al*., 2011; Myende and Nkosi, 2024). For instance, being away from home due to community engagement while breastfeeding. Collectively, these role conflicts are linked to heightened stress, reduced job satisfaction and impaired academic

performance. These factors contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions and indicate a need for institutional reforms aimed at achieving gender equity in South African HEIs (Ali and Ashraf, 2021; Rosa and Clavero, 2022).

Methodology

This study employs a narrative inquiry approach, drawing on the lived experiences of two ECWAs to provide a reflective and in-depth exploration of their challenges and strategies. Data findings are generated through personal narratives, highlighting how ECWAs navigate their roles and responsibilities within higher education. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note, researchers are storytellers of their own lived experiences. Stories have the capacity to give shape and meaning to human experience. When individuals recount their lives through narratives, they are not merely sharing facts; they are constructing knowledge grounded in personal and social context. Presenting data in narrative form, therefore, reflects an epistemological stance where knowledge is embedded in lived realities (Chetty, 2017). A common critique of narrative inquiry is the ambiguity between fact and fiction in participants' accounts (Germeten, 2013). However, the goal is not to determine absolute truth but to explore the significance individuals assign to their stories. Meaning emerges from both what people believe to be true and the imaginative constructs they use to explain their lives (Germeten, 2013).

The process began with reflecting on our experiences as ECWAs, which proved to be a valuable source of knowledge and understanding (Clandinin, 2018). Sustained engagement within the university context was key, aligning with Clandinin's (2018) emphasis on prolonged interaction in narrative inquiry. Employing the qualitative research approach enabled us to share our subjective experiences as ECWA (Lim, 2025). We use pseudonyms (narratives A and B) to detach our identities and allow readers to focus on perspectives based on the findings. To enhance credibility, we incorporated member checking, inviting a peer academic to independently review and interpret our narratives. We then compared interpretations to ensure coherence and alignment of meaning (Charolles, 1983). We also clarified the scope of our study, emphasising that while the findings offer rich, contextual insight, they do not claim to represent the experiences of all ECWAs. Our positionality as Black women scholars in the field of gender and sexuality in education shaped both the interpretation and direction of this inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

Narrative data were first transcribed verbatim and then subjected to inductive thematic coding. Both authors independently read through the narratives multiple times to identify preliminary codes. These codes were then compared, discussed and refined in iterative cycles until consensus was achieved on a shared coding framework. The coding process moved from open coding (initial descriptive codes) to axial coding (clustering into categories) and finally to selective coding (developing overarching themes). This systematic process ensured that the analysis was rigorous, transparent and replicable. Reflexivity was central to our approach. We maintained individual reflective journals throughout the research process to document assumptions, positionalities and emotional responses (Aploon-Zokufa, 2024). These journals served dual purposes: (1) they captured the researchers' evolving self-awareness and positionality, and (2) they were incorporated into the data corpus to triangulate insights, allowing us to check whether interpretations resonated across narratives and reflexive notes. Regularly revisiting these journals helped us surface potential biases and maintain critical awareness of how our own subjectivities shaped analysis.

We acknowledged potential power dynamics, especially since we researched our own experiences (Arnold, 2022). We made reflexivity visible in writing by discussing how our dual roles as researchers and participants influenced our study design, ethical considerations and analysis (Berger, 2015). We scheduled several meetings on the Microsoft Teams platform where we conceptualised our paper and continuously shared our journal writing. Narrative analysis was chosen as the best fit to analyse our data because it focuses on participants'

self-generated meanings. After coding, we synthesise the findings into thematic clusters that illuminate ECWAs' lived experiences in academia, highlighting tensions between institutional structures, personal identities and professional demands.

Findings

The data reveal that ECWAs face unique challenges across the key performance areas of teaching, research and community engagement. These include the emotional labour of supporting students, the undervaluation of community engagement in career progression, difficulties in securing research mentorship and the necessity of working beyond standard hours to establish collaborations.

Theme 1: teaching – the burden of dual roles

This theme highlights the intense and peculiar challenges faced by ECWAs in the teaching domain. Revealing how the demands of academic instruction are intricately intertwined with personal and domestic responsibilities. The key finding is the pervasive experience of role conflict, where ECWAs struggle to meet institutional teaching demands while also managing domestic work and caregiving responsibilities. The tension between these dual roles results in exhaustion, guilt and diminished capacities for research, which is crucial for career progression. This is illustrated in the narratives provided by ECWAs, as they mentioned the following:

> Responding to student emails, preparing teaching lessons, attending meetings, and teaching practice (although seasonal) take up a whole of time. Meaning that every other work will only be featured somewhere in between. So, it is difficult to balance teaching and learning with other important work, especially research. You end up stealing from your own personal time to catch up on work not completed, while the house chores suffer. *Narrative A*

> Most students write assessments on the eleventh hour and when the marks are released, I find myself spending more time comforting them than actual teaching. It is worse during exams when they are unable to submit on the myExams platform on time. They do not understand my hands are tight and I respond to emails till late in the end because I am the first contact person, and they are also stressed. While my house chores are waiting for me as well, it's such an emotionally draining journey, and I really can't separate my two roles. *Narrative B*

The teaching narratives exemplify inter-role conflict (Kahn *et al*., 1964), where institutional teaching demands directly clash with domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Responding to student anxieties late into the night while simultaneously attending to family duties illustrates the strain-based conflict described in role conflict theory. These accounts show how ECWAs are stretched both emotionally and physically, carrying the dual burden of academics and caregivers without institutional recognition or support. Teaching thus becomes a site of emotional exhaustion, as ECWAs juggle student anxieties, technical challenges and administrative pressures while their family obligations remain unaddressed. The expectation that they embody nurturing, motherly qualities further wastes the time available for research and self-care.

This theme reveals a distinctly gendered struggle: unlike many male colleagues, ECWAs must negotiate the overlapping burdens of teaching and domestic life. Their experiences expose how institutional cultures undervalue the invisible and emotional labour of women academics. Without structural reforms such as gender-sensitive performance evaluations and explicit recognition of emotional labour, ECWAs will continue to bear a disproportionate share of the teaching burden. This is hindering their academic progression and perpetuating gender inequities within the academy.

Theme 2: community engagement – undervalued contributions

This theme reveals the difficult balancing act ECWAs face between family responsibilities and community engagement work. Community engagement is a formal performance area, but it is

often assigned low importance in promotion criteria. ECWAs carry a heavy load in this area, but institutional recognition remains limited.

Narrative B highlights a significant challenge for ECWAs:

> I am a member of a community engagement project based in three different provinces. Sometimes, I have to work with the community for three weeks, leaving my children. Yet, this performance area is allocated a small percentage and is not so important in the promotion criteria.

This narrative shows the emotional and logistical strain of fulfilling demanding community engagement tasks while managing caregiving roles. The burden of being away from children and family is substantial and unique to many women, who often bear the primary responsibility for childcare. Because of this strain, some ECWAs, as reflected in Narrative A, strategically limit their community engagement work to focus on areas that carry more weight in institutional assessments:

> Although I am involved in a community engagement project, I hardly feel the burden of the workload because I have learned to allocate my work time according to the weight on each key performance indicator, and community engagement has the least. As much as I understand the importance of engaged scholarship, I also consider that the institutional culture puts research outputs above all other work, and that is where I am focused.

ECWAs' struggles with community engagement similarly reflect role conflict. The institutional role frames engagement as a performance indicator yet undervalues it in promotion criteria, while the family role requires consistent caregiving presence. This creates a dilemma: ECWAs must balance caregiving demands that limit their ability to engage fully in community projects while being scored on this work. The unique challenge here is that women's caregiving responsibilities restrict their capacity to meet institutional expectations around community engagement. This limitation is not due to a lack of commitment or interest but results from competing family demands that men, on average, face less intensely. This dual strain shows how institutional cultures inadvertently penalise women who try to fulfil both roles, reinforcing systemic inequities.

Theme 3: research – challenges in establishing a niche

This theme highlights the importance for ECWAs to develop a clear research niche early in their careers. A defined niche helps ECWAs build academic identity and establish expertise. However, this process faces unique challenges due to structural barriers and limited mentorship.

Narrative B illustrates the benefits of having a focused research area:

> I cultivated my research niche during my master's degree without being aware of its importance at the time. I have come to appreciate my stance of remaining grounded to my niche area as in doing so as an early career academic, it means I have an established background instead of starting afresh in identifying who I am and my contributions in my research area. I incorporate gender as the overarching basis that informs most of my research, as many social issues are engendered. I intend to continue positioning myself in a specialised area, then developing to become an expert.

This narrative shows how early focus on a niche strengthens an ECWA's academic identity and contribution. Gender often informs their research focus, which is important but can face institutional marginalization.

Narrative A exposes the challenges ECWAs face in advancing research:

> My leadership experiences as a woman informed my research niche area. So, I know how it's like hence I intend to contribute with research-based strategies that will enhance gender equality. Moreover, inform gender-sensitive policies that will bring awareness of respect for all. As an ECWA while having innovative ideas, the publication journey is challenging with limited access to formal mentorship.

Structural barriers limit access to mentorship and resources, another dimension of role conflict theory. These barriers include male-dominated networks that exclude women, a lack of formal support programs tailored for ECWAs and institutional biases that prioritise traditional, often male-centred research topics. Women's research, especially on gender and social issues, may be undervalued or sidelined in funding and publishing. Additionally, the publish-or-perish culture disadvantages ECWAs who juggle caregiving responsibilities, thereby reducing their time and energy for research. Without mentorship, navigating peer review, grant applications and collaborations becomes harder. Without sufficient mentorship, ECWAs' role conflict escalates, constraining their ability to produce outputs necessary for career advancement.

Theme 4: collaboration – the need for proactive networking

This theme shows how important collaboration and networking are for ECWAs. Building connections and seeking co-authorships help them succeed but require extra effort and time.

Narrative B explains the hard work involved:

> I honestly survive through developing structured writing schedules, seeking opportunities for co-authorship, and proactive networking. Moreover, I keep all the lines of communication open, like WhatsApp, and am prepared to work after working hours and weekends. Though my house chores suffer, but career-wise, it's okay.

This reveals how ECWAs often work beyond office hours, which affects their home life. Women usually carry more household duties, so this extra work creates tension between career and family.

Narrative A highlights the value and challenges of collaboration:

> Collaborating with knowledgeable colleagues within higher education has made the biggest impact in my academic career. There is always something to learn and contribute. Academia is a challenging space to maneuver; therefore, it requires one to be proactive and reach out to other like-minded scholars and always be on the lookout for collaborative opportunities. Though this exposes me into uncomfortable relationships as a woman, sometimes.

The narratives highlight how ECWAs stretch beyond normal working hours to maintain both sets of roles, which intensifies exhaustion and exacerbates the cumulative burden of role conflict across institutional and personal domains. Women may face uncomfortable or unequal power dynamics that men usually do not. The unique challenge for ECWAs is balancing the extra work of networking with family responsibilities. They must be proactive because academic networks are often male-dominated and less welcoming. This extra effort can cause exhaustion and discomfort.

Across all four themes, the findings demonstrate how ECWAs experience inter-role conflict in teaching, research, community engagement and collaboration. These conflicts manifest as time-based, strain-based and behaviour-based tensions that systematically disadvantage women in academia. Role conflict theory provides a valuable framework to interpret these narratives, illustrating how incompatible expectations between institutional and domestic roles create structural inequities that hinder ECWAs' career progression.

Discussion of the findings

Our study confirms and extends existing research on ECWAs. Teaching remains a site of emotional and invisible labour, as earlier studies have shown (Magoqwana *et al*., 2019; Kelly *et al*., 2021). Students expect empathy and support, and women academics often meet these demands outside regular hours. This aligns with previous findings but extends them by demonstrating how emotional work directly limits the time available for research. The tension between care and productivity creates strong role conflict and slows career advancement. Community engagement follows a similar pattern. It is promoted in policy but undervalued in practice (Nguyen and Levkoff, 2020; Rosa and Clavero, 2022). ECWAs face extra strain when

travel and family duties collide. The result is a gendered "care penalty" and an inter-sender conflict between what institutions encourage and what they reward.

This mismatch reinforces the invisible barriers that contribute to the academic glass ceiling. Our findings on research and publication align with prior studies on the publish-or-perish culture (Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo, 2023; Müller *et al*., 2023). Yet, we extend this work by showing that ECWAs' research identities often reflect their gendered and racial experiences. These identity-driven topics are sometimes dismissed as less rigorous, revealing how the glass ceiling operates through subtle value judgements. Mentorship and perseverance help but cannot fully overcome structural limits. Without systemic reform, individual effort only maintains existing hierarchies. Collaboration and networking are often described as tools for success (Beech and Norris, 2018; Heffernan, 2021). Our findings partly support this view. ECWAs build networks to gain social capital, access to information, support and opportunities for co-authorship. However, the process carries costs. Maintaining networks requires emotional effort, constant availability and sometimes unequal power relations. In this way, social capital becomes both a resource and a burden. It helps women navigate institutions but does not dismantle the glass ceiling that restricts their advancement.

Theoretically, our study extends role conflict theory (Kahn *et al*., 1964) by showing how systemic barriers create overlapping conflicts between home and work, policy and reward, personal identity and institutional norms. We contribute to debates on academic identity formation by illustrating that identity is negotiated under pressure, not developed in isolation. Our data also reframe impostor syndrome as a structural issue. ECWAs feel inadequate when their real work, care, mentoring and engagement are undervalued in promotion systems. By applying an intersectional lens, we reveal how gender, race and career stage interact to intensify disadvantage. Early-career women, especially those balancing motherhood and community work, face stronger role conflict and fewer opportunities to build influential networks. This limits their social capital and maintains the glass ceiling.

Finally, our findings challenge the idea of "resilience". What appears as resilience is often a form of survival within an inequitable system. True progress requires institutions to value emotional, communal and relational labour equally with research output. Only then can social capital become transformative rather than compensatory.

Practical implications for practice

The findings of this study have important methodological implications for researching ECWAs. Using narrative enquiry proved valuable in capturing the complex, contradictory and embodied experiences of ECWAs. This approach allowed the study to go beyond surface-level analysis and reveal the emotional realities tied to role conflict and institutional pressures. In this respect, future research could benefit from approaches that continue to foreground the voices, contexts and lived experiences of ECWAs, while remaining attentive to the diversity of institutional settings in which they work. The findings also point to several institutional considerations. For example, formal mentorship programmes tailored to ECWAs may offer meaningful support, particularly when they are designed with clear roles, expectations and timelines. Such programmes are likely to be more effective when mentors are informed about the emotional, relational and caregiving challenges that ECWAs often navigate. Similarly, creating safe spaces for dialogue, especially those that consider gendered power relations, can facilitate more open and honest conversations; however, their effectiveness may depend on local cultures and leadership practices.

Workload allocation emerged as another critical area. While workloads may appear equitable in formal documentation, the findings suggest that ECWAs often carry additional, less visible responsibilities, such as emotional labour, mentoring and caregiving. Regular workload reviews that incorporate input from ECWAs could help make these hidden demands more visible. Recognising a wider range of academic activities, including mentoring and

community engagement, may also contribute to fairer workload adjustments that better reflect the realities of academic labour.

Relatedly, performance evaluation and promotion processes could be strengthened by more explicitly acknowledging care work, mentoring and community engagement alongside traditional research outputs. Updating reporting mechanisms to allow staff to document these contributions and ensuring that promotion panels are equipped to interpret and value them may help reduce disparities in recognition and advancement. However, the extent to which such changes are effective is likely to vary across institutional contexts.

The study further highlights the potential value of institutionally supported peer spaces, such as writing groups, discussion circles or retreats, which may help ECWAs build resilience and mutual support. When carefully facilitated, these spaces can offer environments that minimise judgement and power imbalances, although their sustainability often depends on adequate resourcing and institutional commitment. The findings highlight the importance of incorporating ECWAs into policy development processes, particularly in committees focused on workload, equity and gender. Meaningful participation where feedback is documented and responded to may help reduce the risk of tokenism and support more substantive change.

Training for academic leaders that draws on real examples from ECWAs' narratives could further enhance understanding of the competing demands ECWAs face and the structural conditions that shape them. These considerations do not necessarily require entirely new systems. Rather, they point to the potential of more reflective use of existing policies and practices, alongside a broader shift toward centring ECWAs' lived experiences. Such an approach may contribute to reducing role conflict and fostering more equitable academic environments, while still accommodating the varying institutional realities.

Conclusion

This study brings into focus the intricate and often invisible terrain navigated by ECWAs within higher education's key performance areas. By centring their voices, we gain a clearer view of the structural inequities that shape their academic lives. And also, a deeper appreciation for the forms of intellectual, emotional and relational labour they perform is often unacknowledged yet essential in the university. The narratives reveal a dual movement: the persistence required to survive within an institution not built for them and the quiet, radical acts through which they begin to remake it. What emerges is more than a call for institutional reform; it is an invitation to reimagine the university itself. Do we continue to measure academic worth solely through metrics, outputs and citations, or do we begin to value presence, care and community as scholarly acts in their own right? The stories shared here do not merely critique; they dream. They gesture toward an academy where knowledge is not extracted but nurtured, where success is not singular but shared. And where different ways of knowing are not merely tolerated at the margins but woven into the centre. These narratives serve as more than testimony; they are cartographies of possibility. They remind us that transformation does not always arrive through grand declarations. However, it often emerges through the steady, courageous work of those who, even in constrained spaces, imagine otherwise.

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