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Absolutely happy in myself

Four Women's Negotiations with Patriarchy

Introduction

There is no denying that patriarchal cultures are unfair to women. The inherent power structures in patriarchy limit women's lives, they limit women's possibilities and they limit, already from early years, the choices that women make. In short, patriarchy relegates women to gendered positions of subordination and inequality. Culture is a defining aspect of gender; the culture we grow up in defines what is appropriate for filling gender roles and how to deal with the power relations linked to them (Albertyn, 2009, p. 171).

However, culture may be seen as fluid, dynamic and subject to change¹, and there are possibilities for new vistas and development. There is hope that women move towards more fairness over time – having choice and freedom, and being treated “as human beings with equality and dignity” (Albertyn, 2009, p. 167).

While the issue of fairness for women is global, our focus here is local as we address individual women's lives in South Africa. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003, n.p.) argues that:

By conceptualising patriarchy as a changing and unstable system of power, we can move towards an account of African gendered experience that does not assume fixed positions in inevitable hierarchies, but stresses transformation and productive forms of contestation.

Through individual interviews², we trace how four African women have contested and negotiated patriarchal power structures on their way to tenured aca-

1 Roughly, one can distinguish between two approaches to “culture”. The essentialist approach sees culture as a homogeneous entity that is stable and static. The more dynamic approach sees culture as constructed; it is fluid and it changes (see e.g. Dahl, 2016; Piller, 2011). Catherine Albertyn (2009) discusses these two approaches from a juridical point of view. In South Africa, she claims, there is a large discrepancy between the static cultural practices of various ethnic groups and the Constitution that specifically prescribes gender equality, and thus cultural change.

2 The individual, semi-structured interviews (45–55 minutes) were conducted, recorded and transcribed by us.

The names of the interviewees are fictitious. All quotes from the interviews are in italics. – In order to keep the original living voices of the interviewees to the extent possible, we chose not to transform their natural speech into well-formed sentences. We have used very simplified transcription conventions from discourse analysis in our quotes:

ACcent = main accent

() = unintelligible passage

((...)) = omissions in transcript

(.) = pause

[...] = our explanatory comments.

demographic positions in South Africa. We discuss how their narratives bear testimony to a change in their identities within the boundaries of *African woman*, a social positioning that is brought explicitly into the discussion by one of our interviewees.³ We then show how this positioning takes on different aspects for the different women in different contexts.

We turn to Judith Butler for understanding how the four women interviewed negotiate their identities. Butler claims that gender is performative in that it is constructed as a “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts” that “congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (2006 [1990], p. 45). In other words, these repetitions produce a false sense of gender that suggests not only its stability, but its use as a marker that is linked *naturally* with sex (2006 [1990], p. 184). Further, she argues that this takes place in a “highly rigid regulatory frame” in which social forces “police the social appearance of gender” (2006 [1990], p. 45); therefore people have little intentional control over this process. In spite of this, however, performativity does suggest that there are discontinuities and dissonance hovering under the surface of these policed appearances, which occasionally allow people – women in this case – to make evident the disconnection between sexed bodies and their genders. Defiant or otherwise unruly performances of gender can be useful in drawing attention to the *unnaturalness* of gender roles. In this narrow space, women can negotiate their roles, and challenge existing power structures to a certain extent. In this chapter, we trace and analyze how our interviewees attempt to problematize their gendered identities by performing in ways that challenge limitations placed on them because of their gender.

The challenging of gender roles involves empowerment. Drawing on Sarah Mosedale (2005) we understand “women’s empowerment as a process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing” (p. 252). In short, as Nelly Stromquist puts it, empowerment is “a process to change the distribution of power” (1995, p. 13). For Stromquist empowerment includes first a cognitive component; women need to understand “their conditions of subordination” (p. 14). This “involves understanding the self and the need to make choices that may go against cultural and social expectations” (p. 14). Second, a psychological component refers to women believing that they “can act at personal and societal levels to improve their condition” and “that they can succeed” (p. 14). Women need to develop “self-confidence and self-esteem”, Stromquist claims (p. 15). Third, an economic component includes “some degree of financial autonomy” (p. 15). Fourth, a political component includes to “mobilize for social change” (p. 15).

3 *African woman*, as we interpret the category, is a gendered experience that transcends ethnicity and nationality. In this way, its use suggests an overarching validity of the category, the traits of which are abstract and become concrete only through the lived experiences of each individual woman.

For the conceptualization of power, we refer to Jo Rowlands (1997, p. 13). She distinguishes between four forms of power: *Power over* is controlling power that one may comply with, resist or manipulate. This type of power is finite, there is only a certain quantity of power, and if one has more, others have less. Power is therefore a question of win or lose. *Power to* generates new possibilities and new actions, but without the win or lose aspect of *Power over*, one person's gain does not need to be another's loss. *Power with* is when people pull together to solve problems. Last, *Power from within* is what makes us human, Rowlands claims. It is based on "self-acceptance and self-respect which extend, in turn, to respect for and accept of others as equals" (p. 13). In a way, "all power starts from here", Mosedale claims (2005, p. 250), power within is based on the feeling of self-confidence and of being of worth.

We discuss four interviews conducted in 2015 with women in South Africa about their journey to academia and their gendered experience along the way. Focusing on the interviewees' life narratives, we follow Bakare-Yusuf (2003, n.p.) who claims that an analysis of African women's identities is possible when "focusing on lived experiences and the intricacies, nuances, contradictions and potentialities of everyday life". These lived experiences are exactly what we are looking at in the narratives of our interviewees. Two were first generation academics (Mpho and Jane), while two came from families with academic backgrounds (Elspeth and Celia). Mpho originally came from Lesotho, and was about 40 years old at the time of the interview. She moved to South Africa to continue her university studies. Jane came from Uganda, and was approaching 60 at the time. She had worked as a teacher before moving to Lesotho and then to South Africa. Celia and Elspeth were from South Africa. Celia was already retired, while Elspeth was approaching retirement. Whereas Elspeth has Afrikaner⁴ background, the three other interviewees are black – a position that has impacted on their lives and their opportunities for education and work.

Girlhood

The four women's social positions as young girls differ markedly. Let us start by the two first generation academics, Mpho and Jane.⁵ Their lives as young girls are governed by similar disempowering structures. These include life on the periphery, poverty, and traditional cultural expectations as to gender.⁶ Jane was positioned,

4 "Afrikaner" is defined as "a South African person whose family was originally Dutch and whose first language is Afrikaans" (Afrikaner, n.d., n.p.).

5 For an analysis of three first generation female academics in South Africa, see Björk et al. (2019). The results show how they are able to construct a new sense of self.

6 'Periphery' here includes elements such as rural vs. urban and immigrant vs. South African. Poverty is not gender specific. However, women are the majority of the poor in the world, and globally for every dollar a man earns, a woman is paid 77 cents (Albright et al., 2019). Further, not only are women paid less than men, for example they also perform twice the

and originally positioned herself, within a broad framework of what she describes as *African woman*, which for her was defined by a rural context with fixed and frozen gender roles:

living up-country I was bound by the culture (.) of an African woman I knew my life was predestined by my parents I had to do and live the way my parents expected me to do

Living up-country as African woman entails performing a set role akin to Butler's idea that the "gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives" (Butler, 1988, p. 526). The gendered identity is predestined seemingly without room to negotiate boundaries. As *African woman*, Jane claims, she is inevitably steered towards the life of her mother, a life characterized by little choice and also by poverty and hard physical work, as she explains later.

Mpho does not focus on any particular set of cultural gender expectations. Her father does not see her, and therefore fails to grant her a sense of self. Mpho notes: *back home I was nothing*. She speculates that her being a girl is the reason for her invisibility: *I always had the feeling that he [my father] wished that I wasn't a girl I think he would have preferred had I been a boy*.

Mpho and Jane show an acute understanding of their disadvantaged positions as young girls. Such understanding is a requirement for being able to initiate an empowerment process (Stromquist, 1995). In addition, they are able to envisage escape, "a way out".⁷ For Jane a way out of the predestined role is to work outside the home, to *find a paying job (.) I wasn't ambitious anything of paying job teaching nursing anything would do*. Early on, Jane identifies one fundamental limitation for women; she sees how economic factors influence the possibility to challenge existing boundaries. Mpho's focus lies elsewhere, to her it is about self-worth. For her a way out would start by simply being seen by others, obtaining an identity at all.

Both girls come to the realization that education is the key to change.⁸ They decide to take the plunge, and to work hard, as Jane puts it: *I found ((...)) that my working hard at [primary] school started opening up doors for me*. Obtaining an education is their goal, and they set about realizing this. Jane and Mpho present themselves as being decisive, acting, and seizing every opportunity to change their lives. They are self-confident and believe that they have both capacity and power to act. These are vital elements to attain empowerment (Stromquist, 1995; Rowlands, 1997). Jane says:

amount of unpaid care work compared to men, and women have longer workdays (Oxfam International, 2020).

7 We draw on Sandra Jones (2004) in our understanding of "a way out", as breaking free from oppression because of class, gender and race.

8 That education represents hope for girls in Africa to change their lives is repeatedly stressed in research (e.g. Holmarsdottir et al., 2011; Schabort et al., 2018).

I went on a bus to boarding school and I knew the power of working hard academically can change and can add to my life and I GRABBED the bull by its horn and I said I'm going to STUDY come what may (.) that's my early my young time

Although limited, Jane's agency enables her to push the boundaries for what is possible already as a young girl. Attending boarding school is the first step towards challenging the original role of *African woman living up-country: I crossed those boundaries and I felt so good*. The move to boarding school is not only a geographical move, it is a move away from traditional norms to others that open up for more independence.

However, there are still many hindrances to overcome. Lack of funding remains a problem, and in Mpho's case the economic ordeal may be linked to her being a girl. She speculates about the reasons for her father's indifference:

I don't know whether he didn't support me per se because of that [being a girl] because there were times when he would pay for my brothers but not for me

Mpho returns repeatedly to the risk of being expelled:

the teachers in my school you know they would have (.) they would have in the morning during assembly they would have this list to call out those who have not paid fees ((...)) and then everyone knows that you haven't paid and then we would be told that we should pack our bags and go

The school roll call is socially stigmatizing; *then everyone knows*, she says. By the public denouncement she is stripped of dignity and placed in a low-status group, evidently with a severe impact on her social identity.

There are numerous other hindrances. Even the way to school is full of dangers for young girls.⁹ Jane says:

we had to run one kilometre everyday together to be safe as girls every day to school it was one kilometre away from me so we had to run it together for safety

In spite of these hindrances, Mpho and Jane are set on going to school. Already in primary school, they have made a decision, and they act upon it, in the belief that they will succeed.

They are not alone though, and both refer to their mothers. Mpho's mother offers financial support, although she has limited means. Jane tells the story of a mother who is instrumental in helping her daughter. Working on the land to *provide food* for her family and fulfilling the rural role of *African woman*, Jane's

⁹ Girls often have an unsafe way to school, and attendance becomes near impossible (e.g. Schabort et al., 2018). Dangers along the way to school include "being raped, robbed and assaulted" (Chiguvare, 2015).

mother wishes for her daughter not to have her life. She plants the seed of other possibilities in Jane and her siblings:

my mother had made sure that she educates us so that we won't live on the land tilling the land doing that was hard labour

Further, she convinces her husband to allow Jane to go to boarding school. Her mother also sees to it that Jane has time to study by freeing her from traditional female household chores. Her mother

would say you don't do anything all you do is to study (.) so the cooking cleaning the house going to the fields to dig that was other people she said I want you to study

She is herself bound by the role of a rural *African woman*, for her there is no escape. However, she uses her authority in the home as a facilitator for her daughter. Through her understanding of the situation, and her realizing how to change it, Jane's mother starts her daughter on a process of empowerment. Her support is exceptional *up-country*. Girls in rural areas are generally expected to do their chores first, homework second, with the result that the homework is seldom done (e.g. Schabort et al., 2018, p. 134).

Elspeth and Celia's social positions as young girls differ substantially from the ones above. Consequently, the points of departure for their empowerment differ.

Elspeth links her position as a young girl to that of women in earlier generations in her family. She puts herself in a line of a continuous empowerment process, and claims to be in a privileged social position. She refers back to a time when it was *unheard of* that Afrikaner women received higher education:

it's quite interesting that my grandmother was a teacher and she would now have been 105 () and for her time it was unheard of that's a lady who is a qualified teacher and is actually teaching my grandfather died early she was only 28 when he died so we grew up with a grandmother who didn't stay at home but she was a teacher ((...)) my mum herself is a teacher and my mum's only sister is a teacher

By using the evaluative expression *quite interesting*, Elspeth announces something important. Her grandmother is a trained teacher, and that was *unheard of* in her generation. The exceptionality of this speaks of constraints; higher education was not part of women's gendered directives. Elspeth presents her grandmother as someone with power from within and the power to push the boundaries of what is possible for a woman, and thus impact communal restrictions. Her grandmother's profession gave her the means to provide for her family after her husband's death. As a widow she became the head of her family, and traditional patriarchal structures no longer applied. Elspeth's grandmother acts as a role model by showing how education for women makes it possible for them to make a living for themselves. She influenced the role for herself, on a personal level, but also for future

generations of females in her family, thus initiating empowerment on a relational level (Rowlands 1997, pp. 14–15). Her position as a teacher, achieved through her own agency, makes it possible for her to show the way towards increased gender equality. After all, without some measure of financial self-sufficiency, female empowerment is bound to flounder (see Stromquist, 1995, p. 15).

Elspeth returns to her grandmother's extraordinary performance:

both my mum and my mum's sister went to university at a time when women just got married () two generations above me () having a higher education qualification

Her voice reveals admiration and recognition of her grandmother's accomplishments. Thanks to her, Elspeth is in a position to choose life as an educated woman. She repeatedly points to having grown up in a context where her parents stressed choice and also obligation to choose. This provides Elspeth with her individual starting position for how to fill the role of *African woman* as an Afrikaner. To be able to choose is unique, Elspeth claims, comparing her family's position with traditional Afrikaner culture:

coming from a very patriarchal situation with authority structures that in Afrikaner culture are very strong many of my fellow school children ((...)) would've been expected to come and farm again or expected to do that because that is the tradition my mum and dad were just the opposite if you want to come and farm you come and farm but if you don't want to we sell the farm and we use the money to send you to education (.) it's a different mind-set from what the traditional one was so I'm really in terms of that very very blessed

Elspeth describes traditional Afrikaner culture as *very patriarchal*, with distinct and significant *authority structures*, there is no choice; life is predestined.¹⁰ She feels *blessed*, when comparing the culture (*mind-set*) in her own family with general Afrikaner culture where, she claims, there is no freedom of choice. To Elspeth, as a young girl, choice is fairness.

Also Celia refers to patriarchal power structures. As a young girl she obeys her parents. Going to school is not an act of agency, but an act of obedience and dependence. Young Celia simply follows the norms of her culture:

OURS was to just do what the parents say if the parents say go to school you go to school no questions so I was educated because I'd you know what I mean nevertheless I didn't go to school or to university because I wanted to I went because I had to if my father said go then you go no question

In contrast to Elspeth, who may choose between farming or education, Celia has no choice but to be educated, she claims. Celia presents her family as adhering to an authoritarian patriarchal norm, she says *OURS was to just do what the parents*

¹⁰ However, she does not claim that lack of choice is gender specific. Boys and girls are bound by similar authority structures.

say, and she and her siblings obeyed their parents. Later she tells of her father's ambitions for all his children irrespective of gender, *he is the one who had aspirations for us*, and he uses his authority to bring his children's schooling about: *if my father said go then you go no question*. So in spite of being traditional with respect to demanding to be obeyed, her father is progressive in that he acts as a facilitator for his daughter's empowerment through education.

Womanhood

All four women have had to relate to gendered roles. However, they manage to challenge their roles in different ways, and negotiate the boundaries of what is possible to attain for a married, educated *African woman*. Celia's dependence on her father ceases when she is able to support herself:

I had MONEY so I could do whatever I pleased with my money so in that sense () sort of support I didn't need support anyone so I had money to do what I wanted to do with my money

Money's importance for Celia is evident through her tone of voice, and her repeating *money* several times. Financial self-reliance, important for achieving empowerment according to Stromquist (1995), gives her independence; she claims that she can do whatever she wants. Money buys her freedom, also from domestic responsibilities, as she can pay a maid to look after her four children.

As we will show, Celia's financial independence, in addition to her having several more university degrees than her husband, has an obvious impact on her gendered lived experience and the power structures within her marriage. However, she moves among different positions, and this is a challenge. Her solution is to separate completely between her *academic achievements*, linked to life in the city, and *married life* when visiting her husband's family in a rural area:

I had to behave like everybody else ((...)) when I went to HIS home I behaved like everybody else ((...)) academic achievements were TOTALLY divorced from the married life ((...)) if you saw me tomorrow if I were at his home I would be looking like any other woman there [wearing traditional clothes] whether they were gone to school primary school or no school at all you see because it's a cultural thing ((...)) they expect me to behave in a certain way and I behave in exactly the same way that they expect and you see I live in town in an urban area but his home is in a rural area but then that mustn't show you see what I mean behave like them so it's not stressful if you know what their expectations are because I also come from that culture

Education is restricted in the traditional gendered script for *African woman*; in a *rural area marriage is more important than education*, she explains afterwards. With marriage follows motherhood, and this gives status and dignity to women

in this traditional context (see Bakare-Yusuf, 2003, for a discussion of this aspect). Far from being fluid and dynamic, culture in rural areas is fixed and stable, Celia suggests. She has crossed a boundary and brought to life the role of urban *African woman* providing her with freedom from traditional constraints. In the interaction with her husband's family she suppresses part of her identity and adopts the demeanour of dependent wife, thereby contributing to the support of patriarchal power structures in the *rural area*. Celia claims that she is unable to choose differently, *I had to behave like everybody else*; and that it is really not an *issue*. Her purportedly effortless travelling from urban to rural contexts is marked by her change of clothes from modern to traditional dress. However, her conforming to the traditional script of rural *African woman* is only an act, aiming at placating or perhaps respecting her in-laws.

Within the confines of her city home, the story is different. Celia does not adhere to traditional cultural expectations of female behaviour, she is not submissive and her role is anything but subordinate. Celia presents herself as independent and being herself:

he [her husband] didn't get what he thought he was going to get because when you get a wife then you get some timid somebody who has to do as she is told see what I mean (.) THAT he did not get you see what I mean I've always been independent so I was MYSELF

Her being independent and resisting the norm of timidity of rural *African woman* singles her out as different:

in my culture it is an expectation that a woman must be subMISSive must listen to the husband even to the point where the husband makes decisions and the woman must obey the decisions now normal women will do that only women like me will not some people might blame my education for that () these educated women () normal women would tell you normal stories of fulfilling people's expectations but for me I've never fulfilled anybody's expectations

She is clear on men having the upper hand in her culture: *the woman must obey the decisions*. Celia continues to explain that those women who obey are *normal*, but some women will not obey: *women like me will not*. There are certain expectations in Celia's cultural background that she does not want to adhere to. She describes the "others" as *normal*, inferring that she, and women like her, are abnormal. Celia also gives a reason for this unwillingness to conform: *people might blame my education*. So, while education is the key to challenging the set boundaries, it is also what sets Cindy apart from *normal* women. In her insistency on the normalcy of the current state of affairs when it comes to gender roles, Celia echoes Butler's tenet that these roles, over time, become "a natural sort of being" (Butler 2006 [1990], p. 45), with precious little room for maneuvering. Something that she implicitly accepts by avoiding the issue.

Celia claims that *normal* women are not highly educated. In Mpho's case having more university degrees than her husband impacts the power structures of her marriage, with devastating results:

after I got my first degree I got married and the man I was married to ((...)) had a diploma in electrical engineering and well while we were dating it was fine then we got married and his mother started telling him that his married woman was more educated than him and therefore she will not respect him because she will bring more money into the house so I think the only thing that my husband was left with was to be violent and to be a womanizer

Mpho is unable to negotiate any leeway, as her husband adopts a position of *power over*, and he loses power, if yielding to her (Rowlands, 1997, p. 11). Her education and income, instead of giving her respect and dignity, threaten her husband's authority. Her mother-in-law argues that Mpho will be unable to respect her husband, and one year later Mpho is divorced. Mpho's empowerment threatened her husband's power, not only in terms of loss of power, but also in terms of loss of face in the patriarchal culture.

The negotiation of boundaries for an educated *African woman*, in a patriarchal culture, is different in Elspeth's case. In Elspeth's narrative of her early years, her very supportive parents stress choice in relation to education. However, when it comes to occupation, she has but one option if she wants to marry her future husband:

I actually wanted to be a veterinarian and a marine biologist so I started at [university X] to go into marine biology and I met my husband and he wanted to move to [city Y] and my mum said you can marry but you are going to do your teaching diploma because it doesn't matter where you are where your husband is taking you with a teaching diploma you'll always be able to have a job somewhere

Two aspects are noteworthy. First, it is assumed, and accepted, that Elspeth will be taken to wherever her husband has to go. This is, obviously, a severe constraint to her freedom of choice, far from what she claims is the hallmark of her family. Second, it is assumed that Elspeth must and will support herself, she is not to be a home-making, trailing spouse. This bears witness to how important economic and professional self-sufficiency is to Elspeth's mother, following the way already paved by her own mother, two generations apart from Elspeth.

Elspeth's education serves her well, although there may have been choices dictated by others. Reflecting on her past, she says: *if I could start all over again, I would not go into (.) teacher education I would like to do something different*. Taking her own close-knit, supportive family as point of departure, Elspeth explains how her husband's very close family followed a patriarchal structure:

being a close-knit family is having its disadvantages as well in terms of you go where your husband's going so moving from one place () although I've got the most wonderful open-minded husband that you can imagine

The traditional expectations of a wife following her husband are met. However, Elspeth does not blame her husband for having to uproot and move, it is one of the *disadvantages* of a patriarchal *close-knit family*. It is arguable that she sees them both as powerless to influence the situation, traditional family structures are difficult to challenge. Approaching retirement age herself in a few years' time, Elspeth now calls the shots, she decides about moving and trying something *different*:

I'm ready for some change now my children are now out of home my husband is retiring and he's said that he'll go wherever I want to go so I think of something different I just need a challenge not a time challenge just something to spark again the wonder and things that you feel that you've lost (.) maybe change things (.) I'm at a point where I have to decide on change now

The gender roles in their marriage are fluid and changing, as her husband will now follow her. Elspeth states that she currently has the chance to *decide on change* as her husband retires. Her grandmother had the power to become self-reliant when widowed, and she made this count also for future generations in her family. Elspeth follows her grandmother's lead in relation to education and professional self-reliance. However, she does not question the gendered position when it comes to following her husband to wherever his career takes him. Echoing her grandmother's life, Elspeth does not become free to *decide on change* herself until she is allowed to – admittedly not because she is widowed, but because her husband no longer decides on where she is to move.

Let us move on to another aspect of our interviewees' narratives. Patriarchal power structures are evidently found also at university. Mpho explains how academia has treated her, returning repeatedly to a lack of dignity. Prejudice and xenophobia run rampant, and as a woman Mpho is treated as the lowest of the low:

studying in South Africa as a black person is HELL it is HELL and being a black person of non-South African origin is twice that and being a black person of non-South African origin and a woman is three times that

The power structures that Mpho meets are near impossible to negotiate – being black, being an immigrant, and being a woman to boot – her life is made *HELL*. She continues: *it wasn't easy going the lecturers they were horrible they would have the most nasty things to say about people from my country*. There are blatant examples of power abuse:

you would have this white lecturer looking at you like you were some nasty piece of that he doesn't want to see in his lecture hall and you feel like you don't belong

The white lecturer uses his authority in the lecture hall to belittle Mpho; the possessive pronoun *his* signals that this is indeed his arena, something that is confirmed by Mpho's comment *you don't belong*. Against all odds, she manages to finish her doctorate in two years, and it is approved. However, again academia flexes its muscles:

*they refused for me to graduate, they said who can do a PhD in two years ((...))
ah that one from Lesotho should wait for graduation until next year I graduated one year after my PhD was passed*

The authority of the university administration is total – *they refused*. Again she is humiliated. However, Mpho does not give in, and there are also moments of pride and joy, she negotiates her own place at the university:

when I graduated ((...)) summa cum laude and I was the only one ((...)) this time my mother was there and she had brought a friend of hers and they saw everyone standing up dancing and ululating and all that they were so awed they thought WOW (.) so this is how you do things for yourself (.) YES

Mpho has pushed the boundaries for a black female immigrant in South Africa. In Rowlands' terms, Mpho displays *power* to generate new possibilities (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13). She has done things for herself and is granted dignity and gained a strong feeling of worth within this particular context. At long last, she has obtained the identity that she yearned for as a young girl. In the constricted gender roles in her culture, she has uncovered the false assumption that has existed under the surface of *naturalized* gender, namely that high achievement in academia is *unnatural* for women. She has worked relentlessly to dispel this myth, demonstrating that success in academia has nothing to do with gender.

Jane has left the set role of the rural *African woman* behind. Coming from a disempowered position where life was predestined; Jane has influenced her own role with the support of her mother. With education, she has moved into a gender role with other boundaries in relation to cultural expectations. Approaching 60, she now has *freedom* and an option of *personal choices*:

*I feel the biggest thing I've gained is THAT freedom to make my personal choices
I'm no longer that little girl who thought my parents (.) determined my destiny
now I'm an adult independently who makes my personal choices and who lives
by their choices and I feel I'm an independent individual and I feel absolutely
happy in myself*

With self-confidence and through self-determination she has gained freedom of choice. Her focus is on herself as an *independent individual*, and the happiness she has found in herself. Jane is now in a position to also help others reach for what is fair. With two years left to retirement, she thinks of writing a book:

that could benefit those young children who are growing up who may feel that there's something they can learn from reading my own life story I feel convinced that I have a story to share

The younger generation, Jane suggests, could benefit from reading about how it is possible to have an impact on assumed fixed social positions and gendered roles. Cultural values and power structures, although rigid, can be challenged. Jane may thus facilitate the empowerment of a new generation of girls, carrying on her mother's legacy. Her planned book may be a step towards more equity.

Celia also leaves a personal legacy to a new generation. Her choice, she states, is not to challenge the static cultural expectations of her husband's rural family. However, times are changing and her daughters living in the city will not conform:

it's a conflict like my children they just don't like visiting their husbands' homes because there is this expectation that they must wear () that they don't like so they'd rather not go

Her daughters will not dress traditionally, and they will therefore *rather not go*. This may seem an ineffectual protest, but there is more to their self-determination. Celia speaks of her daughters as very independent:

my youngest she's uncomfortably independent sometimes I pity HER husband she's just too independent it's amazing I've two daughters and two boys and then the two girls are very independent

Celia is well aware of her gendered role and has, to some extent, successfully challenged it. Her daughters, it seems, will continue this process of empowerment.

Concluding Remarks

We have shared Jane's, Mpho's, Celia's and Elspeth's narratives about highlights and deep despair in their negotiations with patriarchy, tracing their empowerment and identity development. Drawing on Bakare-Yusuf's understanding of how to analyze African women's identities by focusing on their experiences and everyday lives, we have shown how these women's narratives tell of contradictions, intricacies and obligations on the way to increased fairness.

There is no denying that patriarchal cultures are unfair to women. In cultures ruled by patriarchal values, men have *power over* women, and since in Rowlands' terms such power is finite, it is not readily yielded. Mpho is the clearest example of this as her increased status is seen as a direct threat to her family's power balance. However, all four women bear witness to how their lives were limited by cultural norms. All of them display an abundance of the fundamental *power from within*, and the cognitive aspects of empowerment are clear as their narratives show insight into the constraints of their gendered lives. Further, their psycholog-

ical strength is visible in their self-confidence and self-determination. However, they do not go it alone, they gain *power with* their facilitators as family members come to their aid. Finally, all four women develop the power to move the boundaries for what is achievable for a woman.

Stromquist stresses financial independence as one necessity for empowerment, and this is confirmed in the interviews. Jane aims for a *paying job* to escape her mother's hard life, Mpho is marked by the shame of not being able to pay her school fees, Elspeth is *blessed* – not only in relation to choices, but also financially, her parents would sell their farm to finance her studies. Celia claims explicitly that money has given her the possibility to *do whatever* she wants. When it comes to the political aspect of empowerment, it is, however, an altogether different story. There are individual legacies, such as Jane's planned book, but the political aspect would also involve a more collective social and cultural change than mere personal solutions. The examples that our interviewees have set, clearly reflect the unnaturalness of gender roles as discussed by Butler. Mpho, Elspeth, Celia and Jane contest the patriarchal boundaries of *African woman* and fill their gendered roles in new ways. They have challenged the *natural* fixed positions prescribed for them – positions that hinder them from a fair chance to reach their human potential, which for them implies autonomy, freedom of choice and dignity. They have succeeded where many would fail, but the patriarchal structures are, by and large, left intact. The title of our chapter therefore seems singularly apt to also close the text, and the conclusion resonates on a very strong, but also more individual note than we had originally presumed – *Absolutely happy in myself*.

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