



**A Queer Economic Study: Exploring the Economic and Social Burden of
Discrimination Against Black Lesbians in Johannesburg.**

A Research Report submitted in partial fulfilment of the Degree of Master of Commerce
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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences of Black lesbians in Johannesburg, focusing on the intersections of their identity to understand the links between sexual orientation, discrimination, and the South African social and economic context. It examines the dynamics in the workplace and connects it to social relations outside of the workplace. Drawing upon intersectionality, this study reveals how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation do not operate independently but overlap simultaneously to shape Black lesbian's experiences of discrimination. The findings highlight the varied nature of discrimination, ranging from subtle biases and microaggressions to overt forms of prejudice, and the strategic concealment of sexual orientation by some, a coping mechanism against potential biases. The study stresses the impacts of non-conformity of heteronormative expectations and underscores the importance of exploring queer economics to understand how identities intersect with socio-economic realities more comprehensively.

Keywords: Black lesbians, Johannesburg, Intersectionality, Queer, Discrimination, Sexual Orientation, Identity, Socio-Economic, Experiences, Inequality, Inclusion.

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	5
BACKGROUND	5
RATIONALE	8
RESEARCH QUESTION	9
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	10
INTRODUCTION	10
SEXUALITY AND LESBIAN IDENTITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA	10
DISCOURSE ON LGBTQ+ EXPERIENCES: FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL PERSPECTIVES	11
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS	16
<i>Feminist Economics</i>	16
<i>Intersectionality</i>	18
<i>The Matrix of Domination</i>	21
KEY CONCEPTS AND DEBATES.....	24
<i>Sexual orientation in economics overlooked?</i>	24
<i>Gender Performance, Expression and Heteronormativity</i>	26
CONCLUSION	27
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	28
INTRODUCTION	28
RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH.....	29
PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND INTERVIEW PROCESS	31
INTERVIEWS: THE DATA COLLECTION PROCESS	33
ASSUMPTIONS AND SURPRISES.....	36
POSITIONALITY, REFLEXIVITY AND STANDPOINT THEORY.....	37
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	38
CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS.....	39
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	40
INTRODUCTION	40
PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS: DIVERSE INTERSECTIONS.....	41
QUEER ECONOMICS AND INTERSECTIONALITY: KEY ARGUMENTS FOR UNDERSTANDING BLACK LESBIAN REALITIES.	53
INTERSECTING IDENTITIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO QUEER ECONOMICS	55
THEMES AND DISCUSSION	56
THE INTERSECTION OF IDENTITIES	56
BEING QUEER: SPACE, VISIBILITY, AND ACCEPTANCE	58
BEING QUEER IN URBAN SPACES: THE BENEFITS AND BOUNDARIES.....	59
INTERSECTIONALITY, VISIBILITY, AND THE PROFESSIONAL LIVES OF QUEER INDIVIDUALS.....	61
DISCRIMINATION AND THE WORKPLACE: FROM OVERT DISCRIMINATION TO SUBTLE MICROAGGRESSIONS	64
NAVIGATING DISCRIMINATION THROUGH THE STRATEGIC CONCEALMENT OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION.....	68
SOCIALISATION AND GENDER PERFORMANCE.....	70
SYNTHESISED DISCUSSION	72
CONCLUSION	73
CHAPTER FIVE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	75
FUTURE RESEARCH.....	75
CONCLUSION	77
REFERENCES.....	78
APPENDICES.....	86

Chapter One: Introduction

Background

In South Africa, the legacy of colonialism, dispossession, and exclusion, underpinned by racism, sexism, and classism, has contributed to the establishment and continued perpetuation of a society with deeply entrenched inequalities. These inequalities are multidimensional and have stood the test of time, as they have been passed on from one generation to the next. This interplay between the past and present (and arguably the future), has laid the backdrop for this study which explores the intersectional experiences of Black lesbians in Johannesburg, particularly how they are shaped by their race, class, gender, and sexuality. These intersections are important for investigating how (and if) individual's lived experiences influence their interactions within our society, and vice versa.

Notably, while the intersectionality of race, class, and gender has been extensively studied in relation to social and economic inequalities in South Africa (Leibbrandt and Pabon, 2021; Ndinda and Ndhlovu, 2022; Phaswana, 2021) and beyond (Coates et al, 2021; Lynch et al, 2020; Wilchins, 2019). This has occurred in and outside of academic research. Outside of academic discourse and scholarly writing, a quick search on inequality in South Africa, will produce results ranging from official government documents, such as reports from Statistics South Africa to articles in global publications such as Time Magazine progressive media outlets such as Al Jazeera and of course a wealth of scholarly research from scholars across the globe. Consequently, I would controversially argue that there is not a shortage of information about what we currently know about inequality along the lines of race, class, and gender. But what remains limited, especially in the discipline of economics, is how sexual orientation and sexual identity¹ intersect with race, class, gender etc, and the socioeconomic implications thereof.

While the intersections of race, class, and gender have received attention in the study of inequality and its manifestations (especially in South Africa), the exploration of how sexual orientation intersects with these identity markers and shapes economic experience has not

¹Sexual orientation refers to who a person is attracted to (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual), whereas sexual identity is how people label themselves based on their orientation, influenced by personal, societal, and cultural factors. While orientation is about attraction, identity involves personal identification and social expression. Sometimes they are used interchangeably (Hall, 2016).

been sufficiently examined. As noted by a handful of scholars such as Klawitter (1998: 55), “few economists work on issues of sexual orientation, despite cultural and political changes which have spawned work in other social sciences and the humanities”, this has therefore meant that the field of economics has largely overlooked the issues faced by LGBTQI+ individuals. This has meant that there is a void in our understanding of their economic and social integration or exclusion within the broader South African socio-economic landscape.

It is important to note that this study, focuses on the workplace (and experiences within), as one of many sites of economic activity and transaction in the economy. It understands the workplace to not only be a market, where interactions between services, goods, trade occur, and labour is exchanged for income. But that the workplace is also a social site (Aryanti et al, 2020; Lyttelton, 2019), where we can make both social and economic observations.

This is because in the workplace, as any other social space, there is a significant amount of interaction with others, i.e. coworkers, and that these interactions can vary from work-related discussions to casual conversations, forming social bonds and relationships etc. Also working with others requires a level of collaboration, and so organisational culture, in relation to the tolerance or intolerance of certain aspects of a person’s identity i.e. sexuality, can play a crucial role in shaping the workplace environment and in relation a person’s overall socioeconomic experiences.

This study has attempted to address this by exploring the economic and social experiences faced by Black lesbians in Johannesburg, in and out of the workplace, and the impact they have on their economic and social inclusion.

In this study, economic inclusion is defined as the level at which individuals have access to opportunities and paths for social advancement, including jobs, equal pay for identical work, and the ability to build assets and wealth (Adato et al, 2013; Asongu and Odhiambo, 2020; Kling et al, 2022). Alongside, social inclusion is about how much individuals are able to engage in societal activities as equals, without facing discrimination and marginalisation that violates their human rights (Matekenya and Moyo, 2021; Ozili, 2020; Pal et al, 2022).

By exploring the economic and social experiences of Black lesbians in Johannesburg, this study contributes to fill some of the gaps in our understanding of the nuanced ways in which

sexual orientation intersects with other axes of identity to shape individuals' experiences of socioeconomic inclusion. It also highlights the importance of adopting an intersectional approach in research and policymaking, which considers the complex ways in which different aspects of identity intersect to impact individuals' lives. It argues that there is a need for in-depth research that investigates the connections between sexual orientation, race, class, and gender within the framework of social and economic life.

Thus, the title of this study, “A Queer Economic Study: Exploring the Economic and Social Burden of Discrimination Against Black Lesbians in Johannesburg” was chosen to reflect the complexities of this research study, both theoretically and in the layers of the economic and social realms in people’s lived experiences. As an exploratory study, it is an interdisciplinary investigation that borrows both from the social sciences and economics. It is informed by theories and concepts from feminist economics, queer studies, intersectionality and inequality studies. Each of these contributed to a more multidimensional understanding of how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation intersect to shape Black lesbians' socioeconomic realities.

Notwithstanding the limitations and challenges with defining queer economics, this study used the definition by Zeller and Jacobson (2008: 2), which states that queer economics is “the examination and response to the effects of heteronormativity, both on economic outcomes and on economics as a discipline” in its investigation on the research questions and interpretation of the data. This approach allowed for a critical interrogation of how traditional economic frameworks, which often privilege heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions leaving sexual orientation in economics overlooked.

It used the framing of queer economics instead of just feminist economics because queer economics offers a wider, more inclusive perspective that highlights how non-heteronormative experiences, especially those of Black lesbians, interact with social and economic systems. Therefore, the arguments in this study support the view that the social and economic experiences of Black lesbians cannot be fully understood without considering the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, and sexuality. By situating these intersections at the core of the analysis, this research contributes to the growing body of work in feminist economics and queer studies, which challenge the dominant narratives within mainstream economics that often erase non heteronormative experiences.

Rationale

This study was motivated by the assumption that sexual orientation, given existing stigma and discrimination faced by queer individuals, poses challenges and barriers for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in both social and economic spheres. Focusing on the South African context, it argues that there are inherent contradictions in the legal and constitutional rights that exist to support LGBTQ+ rights and how those have not fully translated into a society free of prejudice and bias against queer people.

Moreover, it seeks to make a connection between the multidimensional inequality in South Africa, the most unequal country in the world, where gender, race, and class continue to contribute to developmental challenges. Particularly, this study set out to explore if discrimination that stems from sexual orientation, i.e. homophobia, has an effect on sexual minorities, their inclusion within society and economic participation. To understand the broader impact of discrimination on economic participation and social inclusion, it's crucial to examine the experiences of Black lesbians, who navigate complex intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation, making their insights invaluable for addressing systemic inequalities.

Another critical aspect behind the motivation for this research is the lack of attention that exists in the field of queer economics. This still remains an under researched niche in economics, even within the political feminist economics sphere, and this framework, if applied more routinely to economics and other disciplines, could help to better understand what socioeconomic inclusion truly means for LGBTQ+ people.

By exploring Black lesbians' access to equal opportunities for economic (i.e. within the realm of work) and social inclusion for, this study aims to uncover the barriers they face as a consequence of discrimination based on sexual orientation and other aspects of their social identities. It seeks to illuminate the implications of these barriers to their overall well-being and quality of life, shedding light on the specific challenges and systemic inequities Black lesbians encounter. These insights are crucial for developing strategies to promote a more equitable and inclusive society, where everyone has the opportunity to thrive regardless of their race, sexuality, or any other aspect of their identity.

Research Question

How do intersecting identities and forms of discrimination influence the socio-economic realities and experiences of Black lesbians in Johannesburg?

- How do identity intersections affect Black lesbians' lived experiences?
- What forms of discrimination do Black lesbians experience in accessing the labour market?
- What is their experience navigating workplace dynamics and wider social spaces?
What are the consequences of this on their overall well-being and quality of life?
- How do they navigate discrimination in and out of the workplace?
- How do socialisation and gender performance impact them?
- What is their representation and inclusion in society like?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Discrimination against marginalised communities, particularly at the intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation, has significant implications for their economic and social well-being. This literature review examines the existing research that sheds light on the economic experiences and material conditions of LGBTQ+ people, highlighting debates and theories grounded in feminist political economic analysis, intersectionality, and queer theory, globally and also locally within the South African context, that is deeply underpinned by persisting inequality.

Sexuality and Lesbian Identities in South Africa

According to Ngidi et al, “sexual orientation and gender identity traverse racial classification, ethnicity, age, class, identities and geographies. The confluence of these factors, imbued with systems of oppression and legal frameworks, entails that individual experiences vary widely” (2020: 22). Thus, this study recognises the complexity of identities, labels and various interpretations of their implied meanings and politics. The term lesbian is used here to refer to women in same-sex relationships, and the sub categories, femme, butch, androgynous etc reflect how the participants in this study self-identified.

The term Black is used not only in line with Statistics South Africa’s classifications but also to reflect a broader understanding of identity. As conceptualized by Steve Biko, being Black represents a deeply political identity that transcends racial categorisation. As articulated by Stephens and Boozaier (2020: 327) “the term Black signifies the political positioning of those who identify as Black as a distinct identity from white and “non-white” relational identities. Black represents a conscious subversion to white colonial oppression”. This framing is important as it reminds us how social categories are embedded with meaning and history, especially in the South African context,

where racial and gender identities have been both constructed alongside colonial and apartheid oppression and resistance.

The layering of these identities reflects what Matebeni (2014) Tamale (2011) and Van Zyl et al (2018) have explored in terms of the complex negotiation of sexuality, gender and race identity within a society that is still grappling with the remnants of colonial and patriarchal oppression. As noted by Lewis (2021: 109) “the country boasts one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, and its formal mechanisms for gender transformation and sexual citizenship are – at a global level – pathbreaking. At the same time, however, violence against women, gender non-conforming people and gays and lesbians or ongoing gender-based injustices in workplaces, educational institutions and many homes testify to the fact that such measures have not transformed ideological beliefs, institutional cultures and power relations in many public and domestic contexts.”

This highlights that sexuality and lesbian identities in South Africa exist within a paradox of recognition and discrimination. The intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation continue to shape economic and social exclusion in contemporary South Africa, creating ongoing negotiations of belonging , where Black lesbian women occupy a precarious position at the bottom of a socially constructed hierarchy.

Discourse on LGBTQ+ Experiences: From Global to Local Perspectives

In South Africa, we know that inequality is multidimensional, and intersectionality helps understand how certain individuals, such as Black lesbians experience multiple forms of oppression and discrimination simultaneously. Intersectionality is a fundamental concept in recognising that the experiences of Black lesbians cannot be understood solely through a single axis of identity. It provides a framework for understanding the complex challenges faced by Black lesbians in Johannesburg and their socioeconomic implications, within the broader context of heteronormativity.

In specifically addressing this, the impact of cis-heteronormativity, our analytical lens needs to cast a wider net and make room for a broader view of what gender is (as a

hierarchal order) and what it means outside of traditional binaries in economics, that typically looks at, among other things, the gender division of labour between males and females. This binary view often ignores diversity in the gender spectrum. Recognising this diversity is important as there are gender identities (and their expression) that are beyond the male-female dichotomy. These are inextricably linked with sexual orientation, the performance of gendered roles, socially and economically.

To best address the pervasive impact of cis-heteronormativity, it is important for our analytical lens to broaden its scope. This includes adopting a more expanded view of gender, recognising it as one of the modes of the system of social hierarchy and understanding that implies looking beyond traditional male/female, and man/woman binary categories in economic analysis. This approach acknowledges the interconnections (and distinctions) between gender identity, sexual orientation, and the societal and economic roles ascribed to or assumed by individuals.

This expanded lens can then reveal how systemic inequalities and discrimination, deeply rooted in heteronormativity and gender norms, shape the lived experiences and economic realities of individuals, particularly in contexts like South Africa where intersectionality is key to understanding the multifaceted oppression faced by groups such as Black lesbians.

For instance, several studies have shown that discrimination against Black lesbians intersects with racism, sexism, and homophobia, shaping their economic experiences and material conditions. In *Liberating Economics*, Barker and Feiner (2021) reveal that across the globe, women are still falling behind in the labour market and the economy more broadly. They argue that “this situation is worse still for those who face multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination by race, caste, citizenship status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and the like.” (2021: 1).

Another study by Nyeck et al (2019) uncover similar findings for the South African context, and make the claim that “lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) South Africans experience barriers to economic and social inclusion related to structural inequality and social stigma along multiple axes (e.g. race, sexuality, gender, sex” (2019: 2). This study shows how queer people in South Africa encounter

employment discrimination, lower wages, and limited access to economic resources due to multiple intersecting oppressions, which are perpetuated by systemic racism, heterosexism, and gender inequality. The study shows that the costs of this discrimination and stigma extend beyond individual experience, affecting entire households (and how these households are structured).

From a global perspective, American economist Lee Badgett, has spent over thirty years attempting to answer the question, “how does being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) affect people’s economic well-being” (2020: xiv). In analysing her vast volume of work (Badgett, 1997; Badgett 2003; Badgett and Frank, 2007; Badgett, 2020), she has found that “LGBT people experience unequal outcomes compared with heterosexual and cisgender (that is, non-transgender) people”. Through her work, it is evident that systematic disparities exist and that they reflect broader (and interconnected) systematic issues that impact the economic security and prosperity of LGBT individuals. Furthermore, she has also found that in countries where same-sex marriage is illegal, “inequality in family policies hurt same-sex couples, making them less economically secure because they could not marry, and how marriage equality would help government budgets and local businesses.” (Badgett, 2020: xiv). While same-sex marriage is legal in South Africa, it is still important to examine the state of inequality for LGBTQ+ individuals in South Africa and globally. It also underscores the ongoing need for reflection on policies and legislation that impact the equal rights and protections for LGBTQ+ individuals, regardless of their location.

Similarly, Gore (2022), finds that while there is a worrying trend in the growing repression of the socioeconomic rights of LGBTQ+ people, with anti-homophobia legislation on the rise. For example, in Poland, “as of June 2020, more than 100 municipalities across the country had adopted ‘against LGBT propaganda’ or ‘pro-family’ resolutions” (Gore, 2022: 296), and such resolutions operate to discriminate and create a hostile environment for anyone who is not heterosexual. Gore then finds that, “queer sexuality is a site of ongoing political contestation and power struggle.” (2022: 297).

These studies show us that the social and economic consequences of attempting to regulate sexuality through stigma, discrimination, structural violence and state

sponsored homophobia, ripple through all aspects of the lives of queer people, exacerbating disparities and hindering upward mobility for both individuals and households.

Bringing it back to South Africa, Segalo (2015) argues that “women (Black women in particular) are often doubly discriminated (due to their gender and race) against and treated as second class citizens. One’s citizenship determines access to resources and powers of a particular state. In many instances women and other ethnic minorities have limited access to such means” (2015: 74). So, when one considers the argument posed by Segalo, where she highlights that Black women experience double the burden of discrimination (because of gender and race) as it relates to inequality and access to resources, it can be further argued that those who carry other social identities, such as homosexuality, may experience an intensified form of the double discrimination she describes.

Therefore, if we are to include other factors such as sexual orientation in our economic analyses, this prompts us to also examine the role heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy play in perpetuating unequal power dynamics, discrimination, and societal biases. Heteropatriarchy, as defined by Kelley and Arce-Triagatti (2015: 256), “refers to the social, political, and economic system in which heterosexual men are the dominant group in a society or culture”.

The concept is made up of two parts: hetero, described as an inherent attraction to the opposite sex, and patriarchy, defined as systematic domination of men across a myriad of social institutions.” Woodson and Pabon (2016: 57) further establish that heteropatriarchy “refers to systems and practices that normalise and centre male dominance; male-female gender binaries; and heterosexual identities, family units, and sexual expressions” This system reinforces and privileges heterosexual relationships and identities, often marginalising and stigmatising individuals who deviate from this norm, such as lesbians.

Echoing these assumptions are findings by Ndzwayiba and Steyn (2019: 393) in a study on heteronormative assumptions in South African organisations where they report that “gender empowerment strategies and ensuing initiatives mainly focused on

promoting the inclusion of heterosexual women in and on protecting these women from heterosexual men. Thus, gender empowerment systematised heteropatriarchy in organisational culture and processes while invisibilising and annihilating the possibility of existence of alternative genders outside these naturalised binaries.” These findings suggest that the workplace can be a site where heteropatriarchal norms and assumptions are reinforced, leading to the marginalisation of those who do not conform to heteronormativity including Black lesbians.

In a study, ‘Mapping the Black Queer Geography of Johannesburg’s Lesbian Women Through Narrative’, Canham (2017) begins by arguing that while the queer geography of Cape Town has been sufficiently studied (to an extent), “less work has gone into understanding Johannesburg as a city inhabited by lesbian identifying persons”. His findings align with Ndzwayiba and Steyn, highlighting the prevalence of heteronormativity. One respondent in Canham’s study, shares that “she believes that she works for a conservative organisation and her career would end if they found out that she is lesbian, despite the fact that she is employed as a gender activist. Her assessment of her patriarchal workplace leads her to dissociate from performing her sexual orientation.” (Canham, 2017: 90).

But it is not just the workplace where the consequences of non-conformity exist, they permeate various spheres of life. Canham (2017: 93) emphasises that these feelings and experiences of stigma and exclusion exist outside of the workplace, noting that “for Black lesbian women, the oppressions are significantly increased by their gender identity as women who are routinely at risk of gender-based violence.” Thus, he also makes argument that “Gender identity and sexual orientation further complicate the ways in which we understand the world. The majority of Black women are working class which means that they bear the brunt of triple oppression, with the added burden of economic marginalisation.”

These arguments presented by Segalo, Ndzwayiba and Steyn, and Canham illuminate critical insights into the intersecting forms of discrimination faced by Black lesbians in Johannesburg, particularly in relation to their economic well-being. Their findings demonstrate how the intersections of social identity present unique dynamics of inequality and exclusion for Black lesbians in the workplace and broader society.

In another study, 'South Africa LGBTI: Landscape Analysis of Political, Economic & Social Conditions', Spira et al (2015) argue that the legacy of apartheid, that has paved the way for an extremely unequal and stratified society, poses specific challenges for LGBTI individuals. The study notes that "LGBTI South Africans continue to face grave threats to their well-being—from violent harassment and poor access to health care, to weak public support for LGBTI rights and a rise in conservative evangelical forces that openly propagate anti-LGBTI beliefs. As activists emphasize, the worst of it is experienced by those already marginalized by virtue of their race, class, or gender" (Spira et al, 2015: 8). Therefore, it can be argued that the enduring legacy of apartheid and its impact on persistent socioeconomic inequalities, especially along the lines of race, class and gender can further compound the obstacles confronting LGBTQ+ individuals.

It is notable that despite these challenges, our understanding of the nature and extent of discrimination and inequality against queer individuals in the South African labour market remains limited. This knowledge gap can be partly attributed to the lack of empirical data; for instance, labour market surveys typically do not include questions that could help identify or quantify such inequalities, a position that is directly linked to some of the issues that relate to why queer economics has remained a niche and under-researched subject, and why sexual orientation remains invisible in economic analysis and academic discourse. Understanding the complexity of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation is essential for addressing the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in the South African context, especially as these barriers are often rooted in deeply entrenched social norms and attitudes that perpetuate discrimination and marginalisation.

Theoretical Considerations

Feminist Economics

Feminist economics is an interdisciplinary field of study that examines and challenges both the gendered dimensions of economics as a discipline and economics as a structure. It examines systems, policies, and practices, seeking to promote gender

equality and equity in society more broadly. It has been a preoccupation of many scholars including Ferber and Nelson (2009) who co-edited the book *Beyond Economic Man*, that aimed to unpack and analyse the links between the social construction of gender and the social construction of the contemporary discipline of economics. In this volume of work there are essays from several scholars across disciplines, who examine and question from different vantage points, the connection (or rather the need) for a feminist scholarly perspective in economics.

And indeed, many others have taken on this analysis, for instance, Strober (1994:143), makes the assertion that “feminist economics is a rethinking of the discipline of economics for the purpose of improving women’s economic condition” and that “feminist economics is a radical endeavour”. This rethinking and radicalness are one that indicate that feminist economics necessitates us to reconfigure how economics is thought about, taught and positioned, in and outside of the academy. This is line with May’s argument that “feminist economics wants to remake the room occupied by standard economics” (2002:45). This standard economics is one that I understand to be the dominance of mainstream or orthodox economics that has largely been gender blind in its line of thinking.

As alluded to above, the field of feminist economics has been shaped and challenged by numerous scholars who have critically examined and proposed alternative approaches to studying the economy that are not "gender blind." Some key theorists and scholars who have made significant contributions in this regard include Drucilla Barker who was feminist economist and is considered a pioneer in the field, with notable works such as *Liberating Economics* (2021) and *Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Economics* (2003). Nancy Folbre is a feminist economist whose work focuses on the connections between political economy and feminist theory, where her research interests lie in unpaid care work. Some of her key texts include, *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* (2001) and *The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems* (2021). Jayati Ghosh, a development economist who focuses on the connections between gender and development. Some of her notable works include, *Women’s work in the India in the early 21st century. India Today: Looking Back, looking forward*. Amina Mama, a feminist scholar who founded the journal, *Feminist Africa*, and her work looks at gender, development, and feminism in Africa, with a focus

on decolonising knowledge production in feminist economics and feminist discourse more broadly.

While this list of feminist scholars in development and economics are just a handful of many in this area of economics, it is important to highlight some of their contributions as this study will be building upon their insights and draw on their theoretical frameworks and concepts. Within the context of this study, it is important to apply a feminist economic analysis because it recognises and challenges the gendered dimensions of economics as a discipline and economic systems more broadly.

This analysis helps us move beyond traditional economic frameworks that often overlook or underestimate the specific challenges faced by marginalised communities. Feminist economics recognises that there are gendered dimensions of power and inequality in economic systems. And through this analytical lens, we can examine how norms, gender roles, performance, conforming and non-conformance influence economic opportunities and outcomes. But feminist economics is not without its shortcomings or oversights, and therefore additional analytical tools are needed, and this is where intersectional theory becomes particularly useful in widening our analytical frameworks for these issues, i.e. gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and the economy.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality theory provides a framework to understand how multiple dimensions of social identity interact and shape individuals' experiences. As Collins argues, it is “viewing the world through a both/and conceptual lens of the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression and of the need for a humanist vision of community that creates new possibilities for an empowering Afrocentric feminist knowledge.” (1990:553). This is a recognition of the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, and other social identity dimensions, emphasising the need to analyse power relations and inequalities within a matrix of domination.

This framework of intersectionality, a term that was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw highlights how Black women face unique challenges due to the convergence of racism and sexism. By adopting a feminist perspective, we can uncover how patriarchal norms and power structures intersect with race, class, gender, and other social identity dimensions operate to create, sustain, and perpetuate economic inequalities. (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality has significant implications for both social and economic analysis as it demands an examination of how intersecting identities impact access to resources, employment opportunities, wage gaps, and overall socioeconomic well-being. Intersectionality reveals the layers of discrimination that can occur when multiple identities intersect.

Revisiting Crenshaw's (1989) landmark paper, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, she demonstrated how intersectionality operates through the *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* case. She showed how race and gender were treated as mutually exclusive categories and she argued that in that case African American women were subjected to compounded discrimination at General Motors, not as either women or black people, but as both, simultaneously. At the time, the courts had dismissed their claims because as she argued, the legal system and antidiscrimination framework was ill-equipped to address the complexity of their experiences.

This example illustrates the broader issue that systems of oppression—whether in law, economics, or society—tend to overlook the unique experiences of individuals who occupy multiple marginalised identities. So, for Black lesbians, intersectionality is crucial for understanding how race, gender, and sexual orientation converge to create distinct experiences and outcomes that cannot be understood by analysing gender or race alone.

Intersectionality in South Africa

To understand the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in South Africa, and how meanings associated with these social categories were constructed, it is essential to recognise the country's history as a former settler colony and apartheid state. As Gqola argues in *What is Slavery to Me*, the different periods, slavery, colonialism and apartheid, are systems that should not be viewed in isolation. There is an element of non-temporality and that they are “embedded in each and other and beyond” (2010: 6), thus continuously influencing the present and shaping contemporary social, political, and economic dynamics.

Therefore, the historical construction of Black people as hypersexual savages through the imperial gaze—viewed as needing control through dehumanising laws—continues to influence how those classified as sexual minorities are perceived as existing outside the norm and, to some extent, as deviant (Amadiume, 2015; Dangarembga, 2022; Lugones, 2010). Black women, in particular, were regarded as antithetical to white femininity, objectified and subjected to both racial and gender oppression, a reality that remains evident today.

This contamination of history into today's world, entangles intersectionality and coloniality in South Africa, with coloniality being meant to be understood as an argument that colonialism didn't end but instead evolved into coloniality. Thus, coloniality refers to the lingering patterns of domination, particularly in the production and reproduction of knowledge, in the structure of the economy, the culture and norms, that were established during the colonial period which continue to shape hierarchies (Mignolo, 2013; Piper, 2020; Quijane, 2007).

Understanding this intersectionality and coloniality offers critical insights into the present-day dynamics of South Africa, particularly for Black lesbians who navigate multiple layers of marginalisation. Their identities are situated at a complex intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, each compounded by historical legacies of oppression that influence their social, economic, and political lives.

As noted by Ndinda and Ndhlovu (2022: 100), “the world of work in post-apartheid South Africa is situated in and structured by institutional racism, racialised power and gender relations that are mirrored by cultural or subtle racism”, this shows how economic opportunities and experiences of black women continue to be influenced by the past, in the present. This is particularly relevant for Black lesbians, who face the compounded effects of both racial and gendered discrimination, alongside their sexual identity. These intersecting forms of oppression reveal the complexities that Black lesbians encounter in navigating the world of work.

In inviting this approach to this study, intersectionality is relevant for analysing the aspect of workplace discrimination in this research. Particularly as queer individuals may face barriers not just because of a single aspect of their identity, but due to a combination of the dimensions of their identity.

The Matrix of Domination

Closely related to intersectionality, is the matrix of domination. Collins’s seminal work in *Black Feminist Thought*, introduces the “matrix of domination” as a foundational concept in understanding intersectionality and how it operates in the axes of oppression and the resistance to them. In the matrix of domination, she examines the interconnected domains of power, which are structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal.

Using the experiences of African American women as a reference, she asserts that, “intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organised. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression” (Collins, 1990: 18).

Within this framing, she is arguing that the matrix of domination provides a lens that provides a means to understand intersectionality in more depth. By unpacking how different forms of oppression are interconnected, how they are organised along various domains of power, are maintained across different levels and contexts in the lives of those who are marginalised. She underscores how intersecting axes of oppression—such as race, gender, sexuality, and nation—collectively shape one's experiences of discrimination and privilege.

In the structural domain, she examines power alongside social institutions, and how these can perpetuate inequality and oppression for black women. She emphasises how social institutions are interlocked, and she argues, “historically, in the United States, the policies and procedures of the U.S. legal system, labor markets, schools, the housing industry, banking, insurance, the news media, and other social institutions as interdependent entities have worked to disadvantage African American women” (Collins, 1990: 277).

Comparable to South Africa, the history of apartheid and institutionalised racism and sexism against Black women, closely mirrors the history of segregation in America. Apartheid policies such as the Group Areas Act of 1950 spearheaded the migrant labour system that dictated where Black women could live and work. Similarly, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 trapped many Black people in an education system that was training them primarily for manual labour. These examples illustrate the ways in which the Apartheid state deliberately stifled socioeconomic opportunities for Black people. Within the contemporary South African landscape, the legacy of these systematic and structural inequalities is still evident, and this remains relevant in understanding the social world that Black lesbians find themselves having to navigate in their socioeconomic pursuits.

In the disciplinary domain, she raises the question, “If you can no longer keep Black women outside, then how can they best be regulated once they are inside?” (Collins, 1990: 280). It is within this domain that she argues that power is maintained through bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance. These are not explicitly discriminatory but prevail through how organisations operate. In South Africa, despite legal protection against, racism, sexism, homophobia etc, there are still ways in which bureaucracy

manages to function, covertly as “a mode of modern social organization” (Collins, 1990: 280).

The hegemonic domain deals with the justification of the oppression that is prevalent in the structural and disciplinary domain through ideology, culture, and consciousness. She states that “by manipulating ideology and culture, the hegemonic domain acts as a link between social institutions (structural domain), their organizational practices (disciplinary domain), and the level of everyday social interaction (interpersonal domain)” (Collins, 1990: 284), and in South Africa, cultural norms and ideologies perpetuate heteronormativity, which in turn marginalises lesbian identities. Moreover, this kind of power is maintained by establishing certain collective norms, ideas etc as common sense, and anything outside of that can be used to other those who contravene what is understood as to be outside of what is conceptualised as normative ideology and perceptions.

Lastly the interpersonal domain emphasises how everyday experiences and personal interactions are influenced by the broader power structures. In this domain, she connects the micro to the macro. She argues that “individual biographies are situated within all domains of power and reflect their interconnections and contradictions. Whereas the structural domain of power organizes the macro-level of social organization with the disciplinary domain managing its operations, the interpersonal domain functions through routinized, day-to-day practices of how people treat one another (e.g., micro- level of social organization). Such practices are systematic, recurrent, and so familiar that they often go unnoticed” (Collins, 1990: 305). For Black South African lesbians, this domain connects all the direct and indirect experiences of stigma, discrimination, and of both structural and physical violence. And through this domain we can see how these experiences for individuals are not isolated but are directly tied to the systemic injustices perpetuated by the other domains of power, affecting their social inclusion, economic opportunities, and overall well-being.

Through the matrix of domination, it becomes evident how these domains of power interact to maintain a system of oppression that is dynamically experienced by individuals based on their intersecting identities. For Black lesbians, and the exploration of the social and economic burden of discrimination, this framework

becomes particularly relevant in analysing the interplay of axes of oppression, how they intersect with identity, their economic participation, and their social standing.

These frameworks, feminist economics, intersectionality, and the matrix of domination, were critical for this study because they provided a comprehensive lens through which the social and economic experiences of Black lesbians were understood and analysed.

Key Concepts and Debates

Sexual Orientation in Economics Overlooked?

Despite a growing body of literature within feminist economics and intersectionality, there remains an invisibilisation of the connection between sexual orientation, economic outcomes, and material conditions for LGBTQ+ people, because sexuality is seen as existing outside of the economy. Smith (2020) describes the deliberate attempts to remove sexuality from analyses of political economy and relegate it to the domestic and intimate sphere. This is ironic when one considers how hotly contested it is in the public domain.

This relegation of sexuality to the domestic sphere is echoed in Butler's publication, *Merely Cultural* where she notes that "whereas class and race struggles are understood as pervasively economic, and feminist struggles to be sometimes economic and sometimes cultural, queer struggles are understood only to be cultural struggles" (Butler, 1997: 36). As outlined by Butler, these struggles refer to the routine relegation of queer struggles primarily to the domain of cultural norms and values, that have no actual impact on economic life and the political economy more broadly. And what this has done and continues to do is to present sexuality as non-material and immaterial, erasing its relevance to the study of how the economy is structured and how it functions.

Therefore, the erasure of the connection between sexual orientation, economic outcomes, and material conditions for LGBTQ+ people perpetuate systemic

inequalities and further marginalises this community. By relegating sexuality to the private sphere, policymakers, employers, and institutions often overlook the specific challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in accessing economic opportunities and resources.

This invisibility also contributes to a lack of comprehensive data and research on the economic experiences of LGBTQ+ people, making it difficult to develop targeted policies and interventions to address their needs. And as noted by Schonpflug et al (2018: 2), "public policy institutions, international LGB(TI)Q organizations, and queer and feminist researchers are increasingly acknowledging the importance of statistical data collection on the living and working conditions of LGB(TI)Qs as a potent method to quantify the impact of sexuality and to measure socioeconomic inequalities based on sexual orientation and gender identity". This highlights that recognising and understanding the intersectionality of sexual orientation and economic well-being is crucial for promoting inclusivity, dismantling discriminatory practices, and creating a more equitable society for all.

The experiences of Black lesbians have historically been subject to what can be termed a "double erasure" within both mainstream economics and feminist economics and hence the need for queer economics. First, in traditional economic frameworks, there has been a tendency to adopt a "gender-blind" or "race-neutral" approach, which overlooks how economic structures and policies disproportionately affect those who aren't male and white (Kongar and Berik, 2021) and secondly in feminist economics.

To make an anecdotal example of the latter, I took the course gender economics module that the University of the Witwatersrand offers at masters level, and there wasn't any mention of queer economics throughout the course, while this is certainly not empirical evidence of an absence of queer economics throughout the discipline of gender economics/feminist economics, it is indicative of a broader pattern where queer experience are consistently overlooked or underexplored. This double erasure highlights the need for a queer economics framework, which seeks to challenge and disrupt heteronormative assumptions in both mainstream and feminist economic discourse.

Moreover, the absence of queer perspectives within feminist economics indicated the limitations of current gender binary analysis frameworks. While feminist economics has made significant strides in challenging patriarchal and capitalist structures that disadvantage women, it frequently prioritizes the experiences of cisgender, heterosexual women, rendering the experience of queer individuals subject to erasure.

Gender Performance, Expression and Heteronormativity

Gender performance and heteronormativity are closely linked, with heteronormativity serving as the basis through which expectations of gender performance and expression are dictated. In this regard, Judith Butler's contributions to gender theory, especially her concept of gender performativity, provide a critical lens through which we can understand gender performance, heteronormativity, and the experiences of lesbians.

In conversation with de Beauvoir's argument that "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (1953: 330), Butler asserts that, "we cannot know ourselves simply as body, simply as female; our experience of our sex is always gendered. Thus, we begin the process of becoming our genders from an already embodied, already culturally assigned place" (1998:29). Both de Beauvoir and Butler are highlighting that gender is not a fixed, and it is socially constructed through cultural norms. Therefore, they are not set in stone, and can be interpreted as fluid. This framework is particularly relevant in exploring how lesbian identities are negotiated and understood within a heteronormative society.

This fluidity challenges the rigid binary categories of male and female, as well as the societal norms that dictate acceptable behaviours and expressions for each gender. Lesbians gender performance, particularly when it does not align with their sex, can then be seen as a defiance against heteronormativity, and in such instances may heighten experiences of discrimination and homophobia.

Conclusion

The existing literature seems to indicate that Black lesbians and the broader LGBTQ+ community face intersecting forms of discrimination that may have profound economic consequences. And it raises questions for further research, that are centred on probing the extent to which multiple forms of discrimination (whether overt or subtle) have an impact on the comprehensive economic and social inclusion of Black lesbians in Africa and their overall well-being. Overall, the insights gained from this review will guide the subsequent chapters, which will further analyse and discuss the empirical findings.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

Before exploring the details of the ‘hows’ and the ‘whats’ of this methodology chapter, it is important to briefly address the question of why, in the broad spectrum of queer individuals, Black lesbians were chosen as the primary units of analysis, and secondly why lesbians who live in Johannesburg? Regarding the former, an argument can be made that Black lesbians provide an opportunity to look at intersectionality in the broadest sense possible. Where intersectionality in this study is understood to not be merely about the politics of identity (or rather the controversially, the of oppression Olympics²) but is about positionality and power in social hierarchisation.

This hierarchisation is important in a study that is investigating a form of inequality, because as argued by Therbon (2012: 579), “inequalities are produced by specific mechanisms, of which distancing, exclusion, hierarchization, and exploitation are the most important”. Therefore, it is important to highlight this in this study because, it is a recognition that experiences of inequality are not merely additive but multiplicative, where the overlapping systems of oppression such as race, gender, sexuality, and class often intersect.

In relation to the latter, many people who live in Johannesburg, are migrants, and this is supported by findings from Stats SA (2018: n.p.n), that reported that, “Gauteng is considered the economic hub of the country, attracting international migrants as well as domestic migrants from rural provinces such as Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape”. Johannesburg houses the majority of these migrants, and as stated by Stats SA, “better economic opportunities, jobs, and the promise of a better life are some of the factors that make Gauteng an attractive destination” (2018, n.p.n).

² The term '[Oppression Olympics](#)' describes a situation where people or groups compete to prove that their own experiences of being marginalised are worse or more severe than others. This competition can sometimes ignore the important concept of intersectionality, which emphasises recognising and tackling the various overlapping types of oppression people can face (Yuval-Davis, 2012).

So unsurprisingly, most respondents in this study, are from outside Johannesburg and beyond economic opportunities, part of the allure of this city, is the cosmopolitan nature that is inherent in a city with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It provides the promise of social openness, and therefore acceptance and inclusion, that may not exist in smaller towns and rural villages. Furthermore, the situatedness of this study in Johannesburg is in conversation with a broader discourse of what Johannesburg, with its contrasting realities of wealth and poverty, modernity and tradition, inclusion, and exclusion, provides an apt setting for examining the intersectional experiences of Black lesbians. Therefore, both the choices of unit of analysis and the study's location in Johannesburg are also methodological considerations, as the study explores the extent to which the promise of social openness and inclusion is realised for Black lesbians in Johannesburg.

Research Design and Approach

Circling back to the methodology nuts and bolts of this chapter, this study adopted a qualitative approach that was informed by a feminist economy and intersectionality framework (as discussed in the previous section). Where scholars like Ferber and Nelson (2009) emphasise the importance of examining the social construction of gender alongside the discipline of economics, arguing for a feminist scholarly perspective within this field, scholars like Crenshaw and Hill-Collins stress the importance of understanding how intersecting oppressions are not just additive, but multifaceted, with complexities that are greater than the sum of their parts.

Together, these frameworks enabled this study to address both the macro-economic structures and the micro-level individual experiences, thus producing an analysis that is informed by theory and grounded in the lived experiences of the individuals, as well as being grounded in an intersectional feminist research approach/theory, incorporating the six tenets of intersectionality research as described by Misra et al. (2021), which are oppression, relationality, complexity, context, comparison and deconstruction.

These key methodological tenets offered a crucial lens through which this project understands intersectionality in the context of the research process. Within South Africa, the lens of oppression, which is closely related to how we understand systems of power, recognises the interconnectedness of people who carry multiple identities such as Black lesbians. Similarly, relationality, which according to Misra et al, “allows researchers to directly link privilege and disadvantage” (2021: 9), and it is significant in this study, as it provided an analytical tool for understanding how various dimensions of identity intersect and interact to influence experiences, which is essential for comprehending the nuanced challenges that Black lesbians encounter.

Given the intricate dynamics of inequality, the tenant of complexity allowed for a multifaceted exploration of how various aspects of our social world are constructed and reproduced. Context in this study this on the other hand is important as well because it acknowledges the historical and social circumstances shaping the lives of Black lesbians in Johannesburg and how these are influenced by spatial and temporal contexts, which in South Africa are deeply intertwined with the legacy of apartheid and ongoing struggles for equality and inclusion.

Moreover, comparison facilitates an understanding of both commonalities and differences in experiences of socially constructed identities and categories. Finally, deconstruction provides analytical tools that challenge and reshape the previously mentioned social constructed, even further. Taking this into consideration, these methodological tenets provided a solid framework to use in conducting this study.

In terms of approach, this research adopted an exploratory approach, which aimed to investigate a relatively unexplored or under-researched topic, allowing for a deeper understanding and generation of new insights. This approach was suitable because the topic and the intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation is not extensively studied, and this approach allowed the generation of new insights that is derived from looking at experiences in the workplace and outside of it.

In conclusion, the research design and approach applied in this study therefore both provided the necessary framework for examining the economic and social experiences of Black lesbians in Johannesburg.

Participant Selection and Interview Process

Initially, the participants in this study were set to be selected through purposive stratified sampling, varying across classes, different ages, and mixed employment status. However, due to the constraints of time and scope, twelve participants were selected and interviewed through snowball sampling. This method was particularly useful in establishing trust and gaining access to a range of participants who might otherwise have been reluctant to participate in the study, as all the participants came from referrals through a call for research participants that I had distributed through my personal social network of friends and acquaintances.

Despite the snowball technique used in this study, the sample included women with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, occupations (from the formal to the creative sectors) and participants' ages ranged from their 20s to 40s, with all of them identifying as Black. With specific regard to sexuality, the sample included both women who self-identify as either a femme lesbian or a butch masculine lesbian. Admittedly this was a coincidence, that in retrospect has made this study richer, and was particularly important for gaining insights into how sexuality (and its receptiveness in public) is also constructed along the lines of gender performance (or rather the heteronormative expectation of it). While this will be discussed more in the findings, it is important to note here as well that women who are butch lesbians have an additional layer of complexity to how their sexuality intersects with everything else in the world, and studies such as these, benefit greatly from having participants that surface these kinds of considerations.

Thus, the intersectional nature of the participants' identities in this study, including factors such as migration status and family background, offered richer insights into the varied ways in which their lives intersect with economic and social structures.

To capture the demographic and socioeconomic profile of the participants more succinctly, below is a diagram that illustrates the various demographic and socioeconomic attributes that were present within the sample.

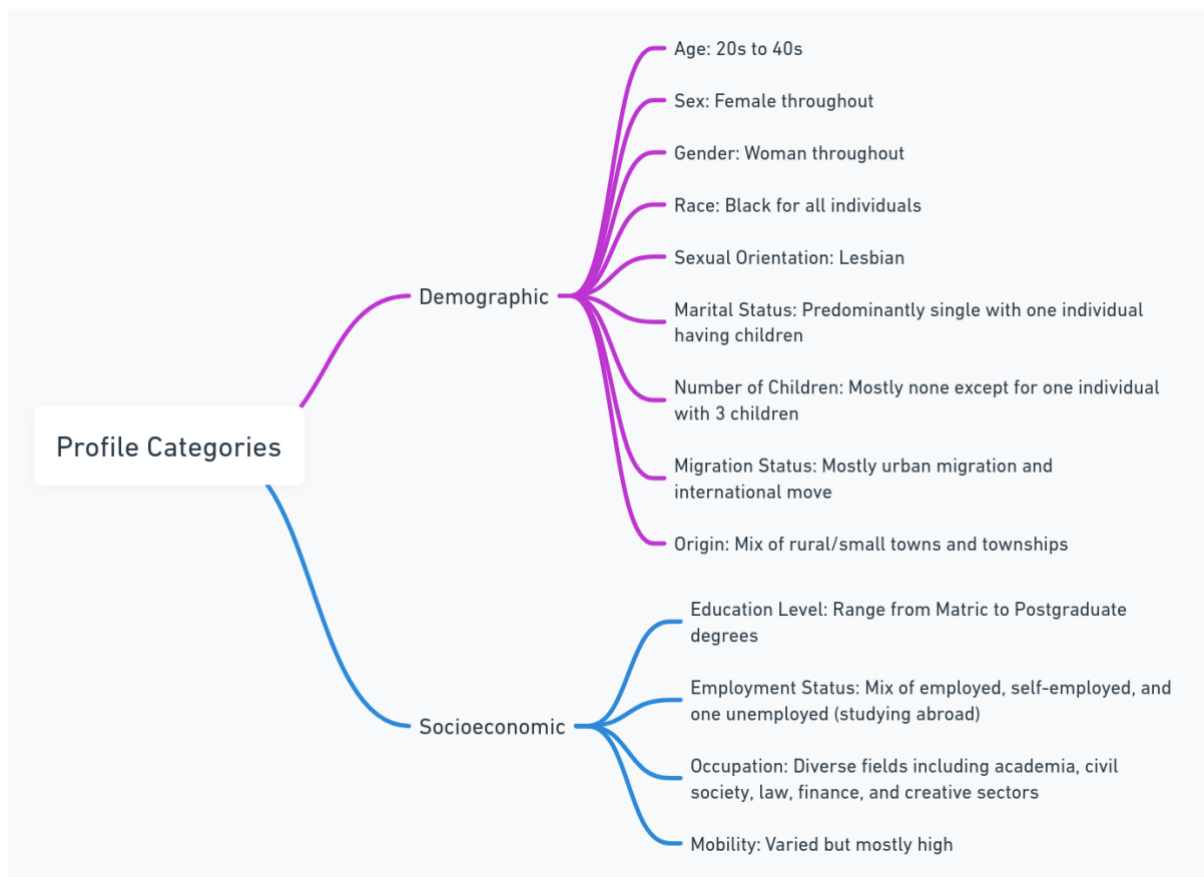


Fig 1. Participant Demographic and Socioeconomic Profiles.

This unplanned diversity within the sample, I would argue, is reflective of the broader population of Black lesbians in Johannesburg and contributes to the depth and breadth of the insights gathered during the research process that were instrumental in the thematic analysis in this study. As a result, the sampling method, while not the originally planned purposive stratified sampling, was nonetheless effective in reaching a diverse group of women and adapted to the constraints of time and scope.

The use of snowball sampling, initiated through social networks, ensured that a level of comfort and trust was established with participants, which is often crucial in qualitative studies involving sensitive topics such as sexuality and gender identity. For example, two of the interviews, were conducted in the homes of participants (while others were in cafes and online), I raise this because the high levels of gender-based violence in South Africa, do not allow for women to usually invite strangers recklessly into their homes. But because all the participants in the study were through referrals, this facilitated an exception to the stranger danger rule. This is also evident in the ways

all the research participants in the study made time and used their own resources to avail themselves for interviews.

In conclusion, the sampling process though divergent from the initial methodological plan, proved to be very effective. The trust and openness afforded by the snowball sampling approach allowed for more candid conversations, which are particularly valuable in a context where issues of gender and sexuality are often met with silence and closeting.

Interviews: The Data Collection Process

Before the interviews were conducted, information sheets were sent out and informed consent was obtained as the interviews were being scheduled and confirmed. Participants were also informed that they could request to stop the interview at any moment in which they felt uncomfortable, and the option of sharing the ethical clearance document was made available to them. Moreover, participants were informed that their real names would be concealed, even though some expressed that they did not mind the use of their real names, for the sake of uniformity, all participants real names have been anonymised. This became especially important when participants were sharing about their current workplace dynamics, as revealing their names and organisations could potentially put them in prickly situations.

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded and transcribed using Otter software. Interview notes were also taken, in order to ensure that important details were sufficiently captured. Most of the interviews were conducted in person in various locations in Johannesburg, with a few via Zoom. AI research software is both a blessing and a curse, as it helped speed up the process of transcribing, but depending on whether the interview was conducted in a quiet room, or in a café for example, the noise distorted some of what the software was able to capture accurately. Otter was also not able to translate any local languages accurately, but the interviews were mostly in English, with a mix of Zulu and Xhosa phrases here and there so while this was not a huge stumbling block. It meant that I could not rely entirely on the software and had to double check and manually transcribe a lot of the

interviews. As these were in depth interviews, many were an hour or more long, as I was working under time constraints, that meant that scheduling follow up interviews was not feasible. One interview had a follow up interview, as they were issues that needed to be unpacked further.

The interviews were structured in such a way that they were conversational, and as natural as possible. While I had an interview guide (see appendix) developed, it was more of a tool to prompt responses, and after the first couple of interviews I quickly realised that some of the questions in the interview guideline were leading. For example, one of the questions in the interview guide was “how do you perceive the intersectionality of your gender, race, class, and sexual orientation in relation to your experiences of social and economic inclusion and well-being?”. This question was loaded, and it caused those who were initially asked this question to want to fill in the gaps in inquiry. So, I stopped asking this question, and some others in the guide. Instead, the interviews were framed around questions that were responsive and conversational in nature. Examples of some of these questions (which were not in the guide), include:

“Are you out at work?”

“Can you talk a bit about the socialisation that happens within workspaces, and a bit more about your experiences within the different spaces? I know, you’ve mentioned that within academia, it’s quite a, it’s a thinking space.”

“Can you tell me what it is about being in university where you decided to live openly and out in terms of your sexual identity?”

“You mentioned that it was more comfortable here (Johannesburg). I’d like to hear about how living in the closet there was. Were you working? What kinds of social dynamics were there? And how were you in terms of your sexual orientation and identity?”

“How did you look queer?”

“You mentioned that your queerness or being lesbian is not something in that environment that people will have a problem. Were there things in that environment about your identity that you think may have been a problem?”

While these questions are just a few of those asked during the interviews (see appendix), they were fluid and adaptable, per participant and this flexibility allowed for a more natural flow to conversations, rather than strict question and answer style. Though the participants may not necessarily have been asked the same questions, in the same way or order, the general direction of the interviews was still closely related enough to be able to make connections where they appeared. All the interviews investigated their personal histories, journeys with their sexuality and coming out, experiences in educational and professional settings, societal interactions, and family dynamics.

After all the interviews were conducted, which occurred during a period of about two months, October and November 2023, the analysis was conducted in multiple stages. Initial coding was performed using in vivo codes to preserve the participants' original thoughts. This was followed by a process of inductive coding, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data. A coding matrix was developed to systematically categorise these themes, followed by a thematic analysis that connected the participants' individual stories with the research questions.

This process allowed for several themes to emerge, which include the **Intersection of Identities, Being Queer: space, visibility and acceptance, Discrimination, and the workplace, Navigating discrimination the strategic concealment of sexual orientation** and **Socialisation and Gender Performance**. By exploring these themes, the study contributes to filling gaps in our understanding of how sexual orientation intersects with other axes of identity to shape individuals' experiences in and highlights the broader implications of discrimination, in and outside of the workplace.

Assumptions and Surprises

Though this is an exploratory study, there were certain assumptions that I anticipated confirming. These included my expectation that most respondents to make a direct link between homophobia and their experience of inclusion and exclusion. However, the research revealed the nuanced and often subtle manifestations of discrimination within the workplace and broader social spheres. Moreover, some of the respondents thought that race and gender were bigger issues, or rather those aspects of their identity were more likely lead to prejudiced treatment than their sexual orientation. These unexpected findings, as will be discussed in detail in chapter four, revealed the strategic concealment of sexual orientation by individuals as a coping mechanism to navigate the feared compounding of existing prejudices based on race and gender.

Another key surprise in the research, also discussed in following section, was that feminine presenting lesbian (femmes) and masculine presenting lesbians (butch), have quite different experiences, and that unless feminine presenting lesbians 'come out', they are assumed to be heterosexual. This is not the case for butch lesbians, who are automatically 'outed' by their appearance. So, it appears that there is a link between, gender policing and the homophobic beliefs.

Finally, age and the life experiences and encounter with discrimination is another factor that was an unanticipated, the youngest respondents, both in their early twenties, did not report making any linkages between discrimination, their sexuality, and their socioeconomic outcomes/wellbeing. Where they did hint at what may be perceived as discrimination (or the fear of it), it was very subtle, for example, one respondent said her workplace was very supportive and open, but she was she reluctant to explicitly talk about her sexual orientation, unless someone else brought it up. She also expressed a desire to see more visibly queer people in the workplace and hinted at a discomfort about being the token queer person. Whereas respondents who were older, implicitly reflected on having experienced discrimination linked to their sexual orientation, both in and outside of the workplace. This has led me to the proposition that the distinctions between the younger and older generation are indicative of a shift towards homophobia, with overt discrimination lessening over time.

Positionality, Reflexivity and Standpoint Theory

As a feminist researcher, an essential part of this research was the ongoing reflexivity regarding my positionality, more so as many of the participants in the study were from my own close social circle. For example, I interviewed a friend, her ex-girlfriend, and her current girlfriend. So careful consideration had to be taken into how I interact with participants and how I interpret their interviews without bias. Additionally, as a Black feminist, I hold certain beliefs and values from aspects of my own identity and experiences that shape how I perceive things. In relation to power dynamics in the research, I believe that because many of the respondents come from similar backgrounds and we relatively belong in the same social class³, that assisted in levelling possible power asymmetry. This process of self-reflection is not just about acknowledging my personal connections to the participants but also about understanding how these relationships could influence the research outcomes.

Navigating this terrain required a delicate balance between maintaining the integrity of the research and acknowledging the influence of my personal relationships on the study. It was crucial for me to remain vigilant about my interpretive lens, constantly questioning how my position as a Black feminist and a friend to some of the participants might colour my interpretation of their experiences. This was achieved by keeping a research journal for field notes and self-reflection. I also used the journal when listening to the interviews over and over, listening for patterns and biases, and discussions about the interviews with my supervisors, in an on-going process of reflection about my research. Revisiting my data multiple times also assisted greatly in being aware of the initial assumptions I had about the research and what I thought I would find, and what was being confirmed or contradicted.

A key component of feminist research is standpoint theory, as Hekman (1997: 341) claims that “it is women's unique standpoint in society that provides the justification for the truth claims of feminism while also providing it with a method with which to analyse

³ Class definitions vary and are contested so it is not within the scope of this. But for the purposes of this clarity, I and the majority of respondents in this study belong to the middle class, as loosely defined by the [Bureau for Economic Research](#) as a household with an income of between R5000 to R20 000 per month. This categorisation is also evident in the educational levels and skilled jobs of the participants.

reality. In the succeeding decade, feminist standpoint theory has become a staple of feminist theory". In the decades since, standpoint theory has become central to feminist theory as it serves as a critical framework that emphasises how the researcher's social position shapes their understanding of the world.

It is also a recognition that knowledge is socially situated, and marginalised groups often have a unique standpoint that provides them with insights into power structures that may be invisible to those in more privileged positions (Harding, 2013). As a feminist researcher, I drew on standpoint theory to reflect on how my position, connections to the research participants, at times my lived experiences and memories shaped the interpretation of the data. This also entailed reflecting on my own identity as a Black woman living in Johannesburg who comes from similar backgrounds as the research participants. Growing up in similar settings like the participants, where traditional norms and values often restricted expressions of sexuality and gender and I recognise that my positionality influenced not only how I interacted with participants, related to but also how I interpreted their stories. This recognition helped me remain vigilant against potential biases, ensuring that I honoured the participants' voices while analysing the layers of meaning inherent in their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

As with any research that involves human participants, ethical considerations are a necessary on-going component throughout the research process. Before the interviews began, I went through the university ethical training process and applied for ethical clearance after. Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the university and the protocol number is CBUSE2131.

Before any interviews were conducted, participants were given detailed information about what the study is about and what is expected from them during the data collection process. They were given a consent form and a participant information sheet (see appendix), and given time to go through the documents and raise any questions or concerns before their consent to voluntary participation was obtained. They were informed that their consent is continuous, and they can withdraw from the study at any

time, if they want to. Participants were also assured that their identities would be kept anonymous and the interviews were conducted in a manner that was respectful and aware of the sensitivity of the topics discussed.

Challenges and Limitations

The study faced several challenges, including the potential for selection bias inherent in snowball sampling. The personal nature of the topics also meant that some participants may have withheld information. I also made the decision not to ask about how much income they earn, as money is a topic that many people generally get cagey about. However, background information such as education level, where they live and where they were, helped fill in the gap, regarding earnings. Furthermore, as this a qualitative study with a relatively small sample size, the findings may not be generalisable to the broader population, but they do prompt the need for further research as outlined in Chapter five.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

Introduction

Intersectionality lies at the centre of this study, and it provides a particularly useful lens in which discrimination is generally understood. Within the scope of this study intersectionality is not merely a theoretical concept but a lived reality for the participants. Intersectionality provided the primary framework for unpacking the research question: “***How do intersecting identities and forms of discrimination influence the socio-economic realities of Black lesbians in Johannesburg?***”, in and beyond the workplace. The findings in this chapter will argue that discrimination and intersecting identities influence not only social interactions but also economic participation and possible outcomes. These outcomes are not only about entering the labour market, securing employment, wage gaps and incomes etc but also about the quality of life experienced by queer individuals within the workplace, and the extent to which they feel fully accepted along all aspects of their identity.

Initially, one of the main assumptions in this study was that Black lesbians face discrimination, and that sexuality, race, class, and gender intersect to create layers of inequality and marginalisation, and that participants would report overt experiences of this. Moreover, it was expected that participants would unpack how these intersecting identities influence not only access to economic opportunities but also shape the social experiences within the workplace, reflecting social life more broadly.

However, what the interviews revealed a more nuanced reality. Discrimination was found to be layered, both subtle and overt, and not necessarily always articulated by those experiencing it. Nonetheless, participants described a complex interplay of discrimination based on sexual orientation, racial, and gender biases within post-apartheid South African society. For Black lesbians this complexity means that they are likely to be in a position where their sexual orientation exacerbates the racial and gender prejudices that exist in society and that even if one has not experienced homophobia induced discrimination, the fear of compounded prejudices often leads to some individuals strategically concealing their sexual orientation. This is because the

anticipation of prejudice, because of being both Black and a woman, already presents possible barriers to one's upward social mobility and being 'out' may invited additional layers of bias, beyond the explicit acts of discrimination they may already face or expect. This indicates that discrimination is not only the overt acts of prejudice but also the subtler, ingrained biases that shape the daily experiences and strategies of queer individuals, and specifically by Black lesbians, as shown by the findings in this study.

This chapter presents these main findings. It begins with an in-depth profile of the participants and their diverse intersections, showcasing their similarities and differences. Throughout the chapter, the spectrum of participants' experiences in their personal and professional lives will be presented. This will then be followed by a discussion of the key themes and arguments that uncover how multiple identities shape socioeconomic realities, a comparison of LGBTQ+ experiences in rural and urban settings, illustrating the dynamics of living as a lesbian Black woman in different environments. The chapter will then move to manifestations of discrimination, which range from overt to subtle followed by the strategies used to navigate discrimination. Furthermore the chapter will discuss the role of gender norms in acceptance and discrimination, briefly looking at the challenges of gender performance by butch and femme lesbians.

The conclusion summarises how intersecting identities influence socioeconomic realities, the contribution of the study's findings to the broader body of knowledge of intersectionality, inequality, and queer economics. The final chapter will make recommendations that could address the challenges outlined and further areas for research.

Profile of Participants: Diverse intersections

The group of participants in this study presents a microcosm of intersectionality within the Black lesbian community in Johannesburg and beyond. Their ages range from early twenties to mid-forties showing a spectrum of life experiences. This presents an opportunity to examine differences across generational experiences as well as the opportunity to engage in an intergenerational dialogue about sexuality, gender,

societal dynamics, and everything in between. Through their experiences and reflections, this study explored the ways in which intersecting identities affect experiences in both personal and professional realms, contributing to a deeper understanding of intersectionality and its implications in contemporary South African society life.

With their diverse backgrounds, from townships, rural villages to urban suburbs, they also have key aspects of their social identity in common, namely, race, gender, and sexual orientation. It is also worth noting that there is diversity within their shared lesbian identity which includes androgynous, masculine/butch to femme expressions, as noted earlier, these lesbian identities are according to how the participants self-identify. This internal diversity indicates that queer identities, even when one is as specific as saying Black lesbian, there are nuances within categories. Furthermore, diversity is also reflected in their professional paths—from academia, beauty, law, and civil society to creative and operational roles. This adds to providing valuable insights into the ways in which different aspects of identity—such as race, gender, sexual orientation—interact and shape social and economic experiences.

Below is a table that summarises key details about the participants⁴. This table serves as a foundation for understanding who the women behind the data are. Each participant contributes to a richer understanding of the intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Participant	Age, Race, Sex.	Sexual Orientation and Expression	Background	Education and Occupation
Akhona	24, Black, Female, No Children.	Lesbian, androgynous.	Grew up in a township in Johannesburg, lives in a suburb in Johannesburg.	Honours degree and currently pursuing a Master's degree.

⁴ The real names of the participants have been changed.

				Lecturer and Researcher.
Fundiswa	34, Black, Female, No Children.	Lesbian, masculine/butch.	Grew up in a small town in the Eastern Cape, lives in a suburb in Johannesburg.	LLB Degree. Lawyer.
Khanyisa	33, Black, Female, No Children.	Lesbian, femme.	Grew up in a township in Johannesburg, lives in a suburb in Johannesburg.	Undergraduate degree. Academic Operations Administrator.
Kwanda	37, Black, Female, No Children.	Lesbian, femme.	Grew up in a small town in the Eastern Cape, lives in a suburb in Johannesburg.	Honours degree and currently pursuing a Master's degree. Civil Society Consultant.
Mamello	45, Black, Female, No Children.	Lesbian, femme.	Grew up in a township in Johannesburg and currently lives there.	Honours degree. NGO Programme Manager.
Mandisa	35, Black, Female, Three Children.	Lesbian, femme.	Originally from Zimbabwe and currently lives in a suburb in Johannesburg.	Matric. Hairdresser.
Mihle	31, Black, Female, No Children.	Lesbian, masculine/butch.	Grew up in a small town in the Free State, lives in Johannesburg city.	Honours degree, currently pursuing a Masters degree.

				Academic Operations Administrator.
Naledi	38, Black, Female, No Children.	Lesbian, masculine/butch.	Grew up in a rural village in Mpumalanga, lives in a suburb in Johannesburg.	LLB Degree. Lawyer.
Neo	22, Black, Female, No Children.	Queer, femme.	From Cape Town, grew up in Johannesburg, lives in the Netherlands.	Undergraduate degree, furthering studies overseas. Exchange student.
Nomsa	35, Black, Female, No Children.	Lesbian, femme.	Grew up in a small town in North West, lives in a suburb in Johannesburg.	Undergraduate degree. Senior Copywriter.
Thando	29, Black, Female, No Children.	Lesbian, femme.	Grew up in rural Kwa Zulu Natal, lives in a suburb in Johannesburg.	Master's degree, currently pursuing a PhD. Researcher.
Vicky	31, Black, Female, No Children.	Lesbian, femme.	Grew up in a rural village in the Eastern Cape, studied in Cape Town, lives in an upmarket suburb in Johannesburg.	Post graduate degree. Actuary and Chartered Accountant.

In taking a closer look behind the data, the vignettes below further flesh out the lived experiences of each participant, shedding light on the intersectionality of being Black and lesbian in Johannesburg. Each narrative contributes to a broader understanding of the dynamics at play, emphasising the importance of recognising and addressing the multiple layers of identity that influence their lives, as well of those of others more broadly.

Vignettes of Participants

Akhona

Akhona is a 24-year-old Black woman, she is a lesbian with an androgynous gender identity. Growing up in a Johannesburg township, she now lives in a suburb. Despite growing up in a township, where homophobia is known to be rampant, her family provided a supportive environment, allowing her to explore questions about her sexuality from a young age. Within the university environment, she became more comfortable in her own queerness as she says *“the space that allowed me to be more comfortable to say that I'm lesbian was when I got to university, because I mean, it's quite a political progressive institution. So, I think being in those spaces allowed me to fully be comfortable in my own sexual identity, which is that of being lesbian.”*

Moreover, Akhona has had pleasant experiences in her professional journey, where she works as a lecturer and a researcher, and stresses the importance of education as a pathway to greater upward social mobility. Presently, she is working towards a Master's degree, dedicating her research to understanding intersectionality, feminism, and the representation of queer people within political parties and policy-making spaces.

Fundiswa

Fundiswa is a 34-year-old Black woman, who is a lesbian with a masculine/butch presentation. She grew up in a small town in the Eastern Cape and lives in a suburb in Johannesburg. Having grown up in a small town, she describes herself as a late bloomer, and she reflected that *“I went through the whole, you know denial phase, because I come from a religious family. I tried to even resist. I got saved twice.”* Nonetheless, when she eventually embraced her sexuality and came out to her family,

she has felt accepted. Her upbringing is also marked by a strong importance placed on education in her family.

After completing her LLB degree, she moved back to her hometown, and worked closely with her father, where she did not have challenges in the workplace per se, but working in Mthatha presented some challenges, socially, due to the town's conservative views on homosexuality. In Johannesburg, she has also not experienced any homophobia in the workplace, and she has found a more accepting environment, but still feels like generally race and gender still pose barriers for people like her. Fundiswa's experiences show the importance of location in shaping the experiences of lesbian women, showing the contrast between conservative and progressive social spaces.

Khanyisa

Khanyisa is a 33-year-old Black woman who is a femme lesbian. She grew up in Johannesburg's West Rand within a religious family that struggled (and continues to) to understand her sexual orientation. She has a bachelor's degree and works at an institution of higher learning, where she also finds herself being misunderstood. She has felt that at work, her being a lesbian is a constant topic of discussion. She shared that any new employee is almost immediately told *"by the way Khanyisa is a lesbian"*, something that maybe linked to the fact that she is not automatically 'outed' by her appearance. As a femme lesbian woman, she is currently in a long-term relationship with another femme lesbian. Her relationship defies traditional gender roles which are also found in same sex relationships. They both present as feminine, and they challenge societal expectations of butch-femme dynamics in lesbian relationships. Khanyisa's experiences provide insights into the complexities of living as a Black, femme lesbian in South Africa, particularly when it comes to socialisation and gender roles.

Kwanda

Kwanda is a 37-year-old Black woman who is a femme lesbian and currently lives in Johannesburg. She is from a small town in the Eastern Cape, where she spent both her formative years and early adulthood at a university in the Eastern Cape as well.

Having grown up in a family that values academic excellence, she is currently furthering her education by pursuing her Masters.

Growing up in the Eastern Cape, Kwanda's early life was marked by a close-knit community that, while nurturing, also presented challenges to her coming out about her sexuality. She recalls, *"I remember coming out to my brother, I remember being in tears, because he said he cannot accept this nonsense. So, I had a proper homophobic reception"*. Nevertheless, in university, despite it being in a small town, it was a more liberal environment, and she started to explore and embrace her sexuality there and this involved coming out to her family and herself. It is also at this time where she also become involved in student politics and that laid her foundation for her activism and work in the NGO space.

But despite her family's initial icy reception, after a few years, her family came around, especially when they met her then partner. Her mother even goes as far as calling her when she a gay or lesbian person on television and to this effect, Kwanda says that it says to her that *"she knows about my life, cares about my life and is happy about my life, and this is her way of reassuring me that she accepts me"*. What was interesting the way her mother reaffirms her acceptance of her daughter's sexuality, is the connection to other visibly queer people in the mainstream media.

Often people who live in small towns and rural areas are not necessarily homophobic purely because of bigotry, but it is brought on because homosexuality is outside of their worldview, thus stresses the importance of queer visibility not only on our television screens, but in everyday life.

Mamello

Mamello is a 45-year-old Black woman who is a femme lesbian, born and bred in Johannesburg, she still lives in the township she grew up in. She works as an NGO programme manager at a women's rights organisation and living in Johannesburg. Mamello has witnessed first-hand the city's contrasts and complexities, as many conservative views about homosexuality are still held quite closely in the community she lives in. As an older queer person, she has also spent a significant amount of her

adulthood in the closet because it was harder for queer people to be out in her early twenties, as it is now.

Mandisa

Mandisa is a 35-year-old Black woman who is a femme lesbian. She is originally from Zimbabwe, and she lives in Johannesburg with her three children and works as a hairdresser. Homophobia is extremely commonplace in Zimbabwe, and this affected how and when Mandisa came out to her family, where she only was able to, much later on in life. She shared that, *“where I come from, same sex relations is regarded as taboo, so I wasn’t really free to explore my sexuality”*.

Even now, despite the more liberal environment in Johannesburg, Mandisa exercises caution about revealing her sexual orientation at work, fearing discrimination, and potentially losing clients.

Mihle

Mihle is a 31-year-old Black female who is a lesbian with a masculine/butch presentation. She was born and raised in a small town in the Free State, while her family was not necessarily religious, it was traditional, and therefore conservative. Mihle shared that *“growing up, I wasn’t really out. I only came out in 2017, when I moved here, because then I felt the environment was more conducive, a lot more open minded, compared to back home.”* At the time of coming out, she was in her mid-twenties, and her move to Johannesburg was pivotal in her now embracing her sexual orientation.

Holding an Honours degree, she is currently pursuing her Master's and currently works at a private university, where her sexual orientation and gender expression have presented challenges for blending in and being accepted, and that there are “divisions and cabals” in the working environment. Regardless, Mihle remains true to herself and lives, dresses and presents herself in a manner that resonates with her most authentic self.

Naledi

Naledi is a 38-year-old Black woman and is a lesbian with a masculine/butch presentation. She grew up in a rural village in Mpumalanga and was raised by her grandparents. Naledi faced challenges from a young age with her sexual orientation in a community with no visible gay people, especially because she grew up in the 80s. It was not until her enrolment at University in Johannesburg that Naledi found a community where she felt accepted and free to express her true self.

But this was also a challenge as she lived in the city but also frequented the township, because this is where her mother lived. She states that, *“I could only live freely at university in and around Braamfontein. But once I left the comfort of university and for an example went into the townships. My mother lived in Joburg in a township. It was totally different. You know that the life and the culture was different.”* While university life offered her the visibility and support, she lacked in her earlier years, allowing her to explore her identity and form meaningful connections within the LGBTQ+ community, she was still in the closet in other places, even in the city.

At university, Naledi chose to study law, and while she made this choice because she wanted to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, it proved to be a difficult career to break into. Her masculine presentation led to discrimination in the job market, forcing her to adopt strategies such as drastically changing her appearance to fit in. Her experiences show how the broader challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles have implications in professional and personally environments, and the connection identity has with the struggles for acceptance for certain individuals, and by extension communities of ‘othered’ groups of people, such as masculine presenting lesbians.

Neo

Neo is a 22-year-old Black woman who is a femme queer. She is originally from Cape Town and was raised in Pretoria/Johannesburg. Despite growing up she attended a Catholic school, she started experimenting with the same sex when she was still very young, and even with this early exploration, she still did not really identify as queer. She states, *“the earliest experience I have with a woman or with a girl. I was six. I didn't put like a like sexuality onto because I was so young. I didn't really even*

understand why I was doing that or why like, I liked her or whatever". Having grown up in a more accepting generation, when she came out to her family, her mother in particular was understanding despite having questions.

After completing her degree, she moved to the Netherlands where she is an exchange student and has not entered the working world just yet, but she believes that her sexuality will be a challenge. With her living abroad she has more concerns around sociocultural diversity and race, than sexual orientation. As a young person currently living abroad, she does not plan on moving back to South Africa after she completes her exchange program, and she stated that *"I'm definitely planning on working here. I won't be moving back home. There's no jobs. What job am I going to get back home? And just, like the pays better, the standard of living is too."* Neo's experiences highlight the multifaceted considerations young queer individuals face.

Nomsa

Nomsa is a 35-year-old Black woman who is a femme lesbian. She grew up in a town in the Northwest and how she accepted her queerness was influenced by the lack of representation around her. She shared that *"Growing up I knew the sort of lesbians existed. In terms of representation, I only knew a lesbian to look a certain way. And that was at the masculine presenting. So, in my head even though I knew of lesbians, I didn't know what the different dynamics of it are. And I think also when you sort of grow up as a girl, your thing with girls is not thought of as a thing, right?"*.

For Nomsa coming out towards her mid-twenties was also linked to how she had conceptualised what lesbians look like and what she looked like, a feminine woman. When she did actually start taking relationships with women seriously, she also started to fully embrace her queerness, as she stated that *"I think the moment I started dating women, I started realising the differences in my relationships with men, and my relationships with women. And that is how I was able to differentiate that, oh, just because I'd slept with men, and that I'd been in relationships with them doesn't necessarily invalidate my queerness."*

Regarding her coming out to her family, it also coincided with her having moved to Johannesburg, as she reflected *“Anyway, so I was in Joburg. And then I think there was like a Pride event or something, and I was really smashed and like sending my mom like pictures and videos of like pride, I'm explaining to her pride is and then she's like to me, are you also gay? So, I'm like yes.”* Her being in an environment where there is a relatively larger queer community and events like Pride are designed to curate queer visibility, like many others she found herself part of a community that not only embraced her identity but also allowed her to live more authentically.

Transitioning into her professional life, Nomsa's early career challenges mirror those of many young professionals navigating the precarious job market. She has a BA degree and early in her career she struggled finding her feet, and although she was fortunate enough to find a job through family connections, it was unpleasant, and she reflects that *“I work with her because now I'm looking for a job. It's tough. I don't know what else to do. I f*c*ing hated it. I was there for like a couple of years, maybe almost a year or two. Very, like weird toxic environment also like because of like the personal relationships. You know what I mean? It got a little awkward.”* Like many in the beginning of their work life, she took a job that was not aligned with her passions and though it was an era that was marked by discomfort, those were not linked to her sexual orientation.

Eventually she progressed into the creative industry, where she now works as a senior copywriter, and is doing a job she loves, and it is an environment that is generally accepting of queer identities. Regardless of that acceptance, she acknowledges that race and gender can (likely are) be challenges for her.

Thando

Thando, a 29-year-old Black femme lesbian woman, grew up in a conservative rural community in Kwa Zulu Natal, and like other participants in this study, moving to Johannesburg marked a significant transition in being able to live out as a queer person.

Vicky

Vicky is a 31-year-old Black woman exploring her identity as a lesbian. She comes from a village near Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, where she was raised in a conservative Christian family, a background that significantly shaped her early perceptions of her sexuality, as until a few years ago, the majority of her romantic and sexual relationships have been with men. This is reflected in her sharing *that “I grew up in your village. So, there wasn't a lot of exposure to gay people and lesbian people. I think when I was in high school, I started playing around with the idea that I think I find women attractive, but it was so frowned upon... I finished high school, had a boyfriend and didn't figure out anything about exploring and dating women”*.

Currently she is in a same sex relationship, and this is something she has only started doing since 2021. This recent exploration and embrace of her queerness are reflective of how people's conservative upbringings sometimes make it difficult to embrace one's true self in light of societal, cultural and religious expectations.

In university, Vicky obtained a BCom in Actuarial Science and she is a qualified chartered accountant and currently works as an actuary. In the workplace, Vicky navigates a predominantly white, male-dominated space. While she has not formally come out at work, she does not hide her partner's gender and sexuality when it comes up in conversation. This approach to her identity at work reflects a strategic choice to balance visibility with career progression, mindful of the potential implications of being out and queer in her field.

As she reflected, *“I want to be successful in their business and actually have done really well. And I sometimes I wonder if I would have done this well if I was openly out, because I've only joined the company a year and a half ago. And I do wonder if I would have received the same treatment. If even interviews, I would have been so open about it. Something tells me maybe no”*. Her cautious approach to revealing her sexuality in a conservative, male-dominated workplace illustrates the challenges faced by queer individuals in balancing authenticity with career aspirations. For a Black woman from a small village in the Eastern Cape, one of the biggest fears is not making it and having to move back to an environment where there are little to no prospects for upward social mobility, and so this creates a delicate balancing act where acceptance

and visibility are weighed against potential professional repercussions. This highlights the interconnectedness between personal identity, societal norms and 'success'.

Queer Economics and Intersectionality: Key Arguments for Understanding Black Lesbian Realities.

Black lesbians exist along various social identities: Black, woman, homosexual, which are linked to multiple axes of oppression, placing these women at very close proximity to possible discrimination, because of these intersections. In this study, participants were acutely aware of the possibility of prejudice that may result from both their gender and race. South Africa has a long history of racism and sexism, that is still prevalent even today, so many women, regardless of sexuality, live with this awareness. Many of the participants in the study identified as feminists, and this was closely related to knowing the implications of race and gender, and inequality in South Africa.

Moreover, besides the women who were interviewed who identify as masculine/butch lesbians and therefore whose gender expression, according to their appearance was not typically feminine, some participants expressed that they felt that their race and gender were not things that they could hide. Where some chose to conceal their sexuality in certain because of this very reason. Having to deal with the possibility of racism and sexism is something they already felt was a challenge.

Therefore, the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexual orientation emerges as a critical factor in this study. Furthermore, this awareness and identification with feminist principles among some participants highlight a conscious engagement with the issues of inequality and discrimination at the intersections of their identities.

In relation to socialisation and acceptance, the various stories of how and when participants came out, were also very telling. This was also influenced by where they grew, i.e. rural, township or urban area. Their religious and cultural background (which all participants shared was relatively conservative in some way or another). Their university experiences (except for one participant, all of them went to university), and this coincided with their coming out as they felt that university provided a more liberal and accepting environment that encouraged exploration of their identities. Surprisingly

many of the participants shared that their families had been mostly supportive when they came out.

Outside of the participants families, participants expressed feeling least comfortable being open about their sexuality within their hometown communities due to prevailing conservative attitudes towards homosexuality. In these communities, being out as a Black lesbian could invite both overt and subtle forms of discrimination, from verbal harassment to social exclusion. The conservative nature of these areas, often rooted in traditional cultural and religious beliefs, means that homosexuality is seen as a contravention of the laws of nature and established gender norms.

In the workplace, most participants did not report experiencing the kind of in-your-face or overt discrimination that is often associated with homophobia. But in reading between lines and the subtext, participants shared encounters that could be interpreted as falling within the broad category of forms of discrimination. These encounters include microaggressions, such as jokes about their sexuality, as well as casualised sexual harassment, such as male colleagues making unwanted flirtatious advances and attention. A couple of participants also shared that some of their male colleagues refuse to talk to them and have an attitude towards them. Participants' experiences of being ignored or met with negative attitudes from male colleagues further exemplify the subtle yet pervasive forms of discrimination that permeate workplace interactions. The majority of participants, including those who explicitly shared only positive workplace experiences, expressed that there was a lack of representation of visibly and out queer people in their workplaces.

The findings in this study also touched on gender performance that is expressed through appearance, socialisation, and the degree to which participants felt included or excluded and how that related to their sexual orientation. For example, a couple of the masculine/butch participants reported that in the past they had felt compelled to put on a more feminine appearance because they wanted to fit in, wanted to get hired, wanted to stay in the closet in their community and family, and this highlights the tangible impact of societal norms on individual lives. This adaptation is not merely a personal choice but a strategic response to the anticipated or experienced

discrimination in various spheres of life, including the workplace, community, and family settings.

Intersecting Identities and Their Relationship to Queer Economics

This intersectional analysis in this study extends into what I earlier called queer economics, by arguing that these intersecting identities influence not just social interactions but also economic participation and possible outcomes. Outcomes are understood not only as promotions or income brackets but also the quality of life of a queer person in the workplace. Queer economics challenges traditional economic theories by demonstrating how the plausibility of the intersection of sexual orientation, gender, race etc. can create unique economic realities for individuals. It emphasizes the necessity of considering how systemic inequalities and discrimination shape economic opportunities and overall well-being. This is evident in the mention of homo prejudice that is present in microaggressions that impact the compromised levels of comfort in the workplace of queer individuals.

Thus, using both intersectionality and queer economics can help us understand better what barriers to equal economic participation for queer individuals are not immediately evident when we simply look at whether or not queer individuals are employed or not in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, the strategic adaptation of gender performance among some participants, compelled by societal pressures to conform to normative gender expectations, reflects an economic calculus. This adaptation is a response to anticipated economic discrimination, where deviating from gender norms can result in penalisation in the labour market.

This then highlights that even when discrimination hasn't occurred, there is fear of discrimination, marginalisation, or even job loss because of one's queer identity. And even when it is not a direct threat to job security, there are questions that remain about whether or not those who are employed will be in environments that are not hostile towards them because of homophobic social attitudes.

The data gathered in this study therefore shows the complexities and nuances of discrimination stemming from intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation, a topic that will be explored in greater depth in the following sections.

Themes and Discussion

The Intersection of Identities

The intersection of identities can shape both the social and economic aspects of people's lives, and as highlighted before, it has been extensively documented that race and gender play a role in determining access to opportunities, resources, and societal treatment. This is of particular relevance in South Africa, a country known for being the most unequal country, at multiple dimensions (Brunori et al, 2019; Mthembu, 2024; Stats SA, 2019). The narratives shared by participants in the interviews illustrate the multifaceted nature of identity and its implications, and how sexual orientation further complicates their experiences of discrimination. Moreover, the impact of these intersections may be felt differently in the workplace compared to the family or community setting.

Nomsa (age 35), a copywriter, captured this, when asked about if she thinks her sexual orientation is a factor in her experiences in the workplace, *"the lesbian thing is almost the cherry on top, right? Because naturally, I will have the Black angry woman sort of like thing on me"*. Nomsa also expressed that there is already a double marginalisation on the basis of her race and gender, and she interestingly noted that her sexuality had not posed any significant challenges for her, nor has her sexuality led to any discrimination in her professional life, but she states that *"I think with that being a lesbian doesn't quite help"*. This indicates that, even when individuals have not faced direct discrimination due to their sexual orientation, there is a sense that this aspect of their identity can contribute to existing vulnerabilities based on race and gender.

This is emphasised by Drydakis and Zimmerman (2020:3) who note that "it is puzzling to observe that a penalty for lesbian women might have arisen in a time of social

progress. Being a woman and sexual orientation minority might be associated with a double jeopardy and the newest patterns introduce new questions in the field. At the same time, sexual orientation and gender identity minorities continue to experience severe occupational access constraints due to distastes and stereotypes.” The concept of “double jeopardy,” as highlighted by Drydakis and Zimmerman (2020), suggests that individuals who belong to more than one marginalised group may face compounded forms of discrimination.

To illustrate this, participant, Vicky (age 35), an actuary, explained *“I think the treatment that I have seen been given to Black people at my current workplace, they have been incidences where I have seen blatant racism. And then I tried to think about the intersection between being a Black woman and being a queer woman. And I think sometimes it's just like a mental thing that I think already have enough discrimination coming my way. And probably might be better to not say anything. So, I think it has to do with the fact that I have already seen some weird treatment when it comes to race and I don't know how it is going to land when it comes to sexuality.”*

This reflection by Vicky suggests that when individuals have already witnessed the ill treatment people around them have received as a result of certain aspects of their identity, i.e. race in the above example, they have a heightened sense of awareness of what intersecting identities may bring. There is then a perception that biases can coalesce and create further complexities for those who embody marginalised identities.

The narratives of Nomsa and Vicky, alongside the insights provided by Drydakis and Zimmerman, highlight the critical importance of adopting an intersectional lens in understanding and addressing discrimination in relation to economic outcomes. Black women in South Africa are acutely aware of the axes of oppression-racism and sexism, that have historically operated against them.

The historical context of racism and gender discrimination in South Africa has perpetuated inequalities across various sectors, influencing employment, income, and career satisfaction and advancement opportunities. And while little is known about what sexual orientation does to this dynamic, insights shared by participants show that

interactions between different aspects of an individual's identity can produce unique experiences of disadvantage and discrimination.

This section exploring the intersectional identity of the participants within the South African socioeconomic landscape has set a critical foundation for understanding the particularities of gender, race and sexual orientation, and the following section will look at what being queer means in different spaces and contexts and transition to the implications of visibility and representation.

Being Queer: Space, Visibility, and Acceptance

Most respondents in this study migrated from rural areas or small towns. Their experiences in rural and urban areas showed the influence of location, community attitudes and the visibility, safety, and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in both rural and urban settings (Khuzwayo, 2023; Ngidi et al, 2020; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2015). From the interviews, it became evident that the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in public spaces are influenced by the social and cultural norms of those environments.

Rural areas and small towns are often characterised by conservative values, which are aligned with heteronormative values and beliefs, that are in contradiction with accepting that sexuality is a spectrum, and that two gender (and its roles) are socially constructed. This can make life difficult for those who are queer and consequently LGBTQ+ people in these areas may choose to conceal their sexual orientation and gender identity to avoid risks of verbal harassment, social exclusion, stigma, and discrimination.

On the other hand, urban spaces and cities are depicted as more accepting and safer for the LGBTQ+ community. For example, portrayals of queer peoples' lives in South African cities in the media such as TV shows, and other forms of entertainment have become more visible over the years (Talmor, 2013). This has contributed to the idea that life for LGBTQ+ people is more liberated in the urban city space.

As queer lives and stories become more embedded in mainstream media, they challenge existing prejudices and operate to normalise the existence of queer people in society. I remember my earliest memory of a homosexual character on television was watching the sitcom **Streaks**⁵, which was set in a Cape Town hair salon, with an over-the-top gay character. While the main queer character may have been a bit of a caricature, it played a significant role in normalising queer presence in everyday setting, especially because this show aired in the early 90s.

Other noteworthy examples include, **Isidingo**⁶ a soap opera that had one of the earliest to show same sex marriage on our TV screens. Similarly, **Generations: The Legacy**⁷ also broke ground in 2016, by having a transgender character in its storyline. Both shows are set in bustling urban cities. **The Queen**⁸ features a main character who is a gay man, portrayed by an actor who is a gay man in real life and has his own reality show⁹, further blurring the lines between representation and reality, and offering viewers a glimpse into the lived experiences of queer individuals. While many of these examples are of gay men. There have been shows with lesbian characters, examples include **Zero Tolerance**¹⁰, with its lesbian police officer character. **Society**¹¹, a TV show in the early 00s, set in Johannesburg, centered around the lives of different women, including a lesbian couple.

The visibility of such storylines in urban spaces emphasises the contrast between rural and urban experiences for LGBTQ+ individuals and has shown the allure of the promise of inclusion and acceptance.

Being Queer in Urban Spaces: The Benefits and Boundaries

⁵ Clip from the TV Show Streaks <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLMOD0N9EjM>

⁶ Isidingo IMDb <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373543/>

⁷ Generations IMDb <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0401937/>

⁸ The Queen IMDb <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6558110/>

⁹ Moshe Ndiki, a popular gay personality, and actor on The Queen also has a reality show, 'Life with Moshe'.

¹⁰ Zero Tolerance IMDb <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9395956/>

¹¹ Society IMDb <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1343016/>

As articulated by Matebeni, “space is integral to many gay people’s lives and to identity formation in general. Where and how you are located as a gay, lesbian, or trans person determines how you will be perceived in that particular space and, in turn, your experience of that space or place. At the same time, that space may be reconfigured by the presence of gay, lesbian, or trans people’s visibility in it. Being visible as a lesbian or gay person can be tricky” (2011, 104). It is therefore arguable that the visibility of queer people in urban spaces presents both opportunities and challenges for identity formation and social belonging.

When we look at Johannesburg or any city like it, you may very well find that there are still spaces within the city that aren’t queer friendly, and so the city is arguably not entirely queer friendly landscape, despite what we may have seen in television and pop culture. For instance, townships have been extensively written about as unsafe places for queer people (Govender, 2019; Mkhize et al, 2010; Muholi, 2004; Wilson, 2018;) and in these areas’ socioeconomic issues such as poverty and unemployment contribute to the high levels of violence and homophobia in them. While urban areas may offer more anonymity and potential support networks, they also reflect the broader social inequalities present in society, because townships are a product of spatial apartheid planning, and the legacies thereof.

Thus, the experience of being queer in Johannesburg, or any city like it, is deeply influence by factors such as race, class and spatial politics. As Ngidi et al note, “space is not merely a fixed or objective tangible entity, existing whether or not it is directly acknowledged, but is produced by and is productive of an enmeshment of power, subjectivity, body and environment through which it is then perceived, known and experienced” (2020: 20), this means that the experience of space for queer individuals in urban areas like Johannesburg is not static but shaped by the socio-political conditions of that environment. Thus, while urban spaces may offer greater potential for queer community and identity formation, they also reproduce the broader social inequalities present in society.

On intersectionality and queerphobia, Ngidi et al (2020: 23) state, “often legacies of class, race and Apartheid separatist spatial planning intersect to determine the myriads of experiences for queer people. Queerphobia may be targeted against sexual

orientation, gender identity and non-conformity, and particularly the visibility of that non-conformity or perceived difference. Rural areas and townships (or “locations”) were often described as hostile towards queer people, particularly those who are more visible through dress and behaviour, and especially transwomen”. This interconnectedness of spatial dynamics and aspects of social identity highlights how queer visibility vis-a-vie safety varies and that the experiences of queer individuals are profoundly shaped by their geopolitical and social contexts.

This then raises further questions about the relationship between space, visibility and acceptance. Is homophobia more intense in small towns and rural areas? Are cities safer and more accepting of queer identities? While these questions were not directly addressed in this study, from the interviews with participants, the move from living in rural areas and small towns to urban spaces marked a clear shift in their quality of life and a perception of being able to live more freely. Yet, as mentioned earlier, urban environments are not homogenous spaces and still reflect the broader inequalities of society, making the question of visibility and acceptance for queer individuals far more complex and non-uniform.

Intersectionality, Visibility, and the Professional Lives of Black Lesbians

Fundiswa (age 34), who works as a lawyer and is a masculine presenting lesbian, shared that her sexuality has not been an issue for her professional life. The challenges she has faced with her sexuality, have been out of the office. In recounting her experiences in her hometown, she says, *“in Mthatha, a place that I find it quite homophobic as a town. You move between spaces when really, you're just being questioned, you'd walk into spaces where comments are being made and people are quite rude. I can recall as grandmother, I was just walking past, minding my business, and she says that “akanasine lomntana”, which means I don't have a gender. And then I was like, wow, kind of rude. I mean, I see what you're saying. But like there's there's a way of saying it”*.

Having grown up in Mthatha myself, I wanted to know how being a lesbian woman in Johannesburg compared to Mthatha. In response to my question, Fundiswa

responded, *“eMthatha I could be at your house. Your family's cool and we are having a good time. The moment I step out your gate your neighbor has something homophobic to say. In Mthatha homophobic language is normalised. When I worked there, even in the office, the people every day, would just be bashing the gays, and if I defend that, I would be at risk of outing myself. And eMthatha I have found it to be a general thing, from professionals, to people on the street”*.

In relation to Fundiswa's experiences, most of the respondents in this study expressed that the rural areas, small towns and townships they grew up in made it difficult for them to come out, a situation that changed once they were in Johannesburg. These reflections are indicative of the transformative impact location can have. Even though homophobia, discrimination etc. still exist in cities, they nonetheless offer greater opportunities for individuals to live more openly and freely.

Despite participants being able to live more freely in the urban landscape, the majority shared that within the workplaces, there is still a lack of visibility and representation of queer people. Akhona (24) who is a researcher and a lecturer, shared that *“Sometimes it's quite uncomfortable, especially when you're entering a space for the very first time because you're not seeing anyone that looks like you. So, you start to question yourself and be very conscious of how queer you can be in that space. Because now you don't want to be too queer the space where people are not necessarily used to having lesbians around them, or queer people around them, to the extent that you sometimes have to tone down specific things to protect yourself. Because I'm quite androgenous in my style of dressing as well. So, you can see that this person is masculine, but I also try to tone it down a bit, like, you know, like not necessarily be, you know, identifying as a butch lesbian or stud or anything like that.*

So, I think it makes me very uncomfortable sometimes. And I also kind of, like try to move past that by saying to myself that like it's a job. And sometimes it's really just about experience and qualifications and just keep it moving. But I would like to work in a space where I can see a lot more of the people that look like me and spend time with those people, have chats, build genuine friendships and just, you know, have a sense of community within that space to know that you'd anything happened to me

and when someone else can vocalise those concerns and they can speak for me, they can be on my side and advocate for me”.

This reflection from Akhona indicates that even in the absence of homophobia in the workplace, being queer can be a lonely experience, and this matters because representation is a key ingredient for fostering diversity. The need for LGBTQ+ visibility and representation in the workplace is not merely about countering discrimination, but it is also about creating environments where queer can see themselves reaching leadership positions and positions of authority. This is echoed in a reflection by Vicky as well, who stated that *“visibility is very important. That’s why things like having black people in leadership, there is research that’s been done to see that it actually encourages people to see someone who looks like them”*. For queer people visibility and representation can signal that their sexual orientation will not be a barrier for them in any career that they chose and pursue, and representation can also challenge and shift the status quo, which is often steeped in heteronormativity.

Furthermore, just like there are initiatives to encourage girls to pursue STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths) careers, the visibility of queer people in all sectors contributes to dispelling the idea that queer people are only capable of being entertainers, creatives or ‘personality hires’¹². This challenges stereotypes that may confine LGBTQ+ to certain sectors. As Naledi remarked, *“not all of us are artists or creatives. Some of us are academics. Some are nerds. You get all different kinds of lesbians and queer people”*, emphasising the importance of diversity within all kinds of professional settings. Similarly, Nomsa who is a creative, calls for more representation of butch/masculine lesbians, *“I think like, especially masculine, lesbian women, I feel, that needs a lot more representation in a lot more other markets, not just the creatives”*, speaking to the need for visibility across the spectrum of queer identities.

Thus, as feminist economics has fought for the legitimacy of gender in economic relations, queer economics can also challenge heteronormativity and the conflation of

¹² Colloquially, a personality hire is a person who is hired not for their actual skills and qualifications, but because they lift the mood with their humor or upbeat personality and are not actually taken seriously.

gender and sexuality as one category. There is clearly a lot more research that is needed to understand the ways in which sexual orientation intersects with economic outcomes and experiences. As some of the reflections shared by participants in this study highlight, there is a critical need for more visibility and representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace and beyond.

In taking a closer inspection of discrimination, the next section examines how discrimination is manifested in the professional lives of participants in this study, showing the intricacies of both overt and subtle discrimination.

Discrimination and the Workplace: From Overt Discrimination to Subtle Microaggressions

The findings reveal that discrimination is as complex and multifaceted as the concept of intersectionality itself. Just as individual identities intersect to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression, so does discrimination and its manifestation in various forms. It is sometimes subtle, and it is sometimes overt, and is influenced by identity markers in different ways. This is reflected in the lived experiences of the participants, where discrimination can be both blatant and subtle, institutional, and interpersonal.

For example, casual workplace banter about respondents' sexuality, can appear innocent but can cross the line into homophobic territory. This was the case with Khanyisa who shared that *"you know, the guys, my colleagues, were like, but why are you lesbian? It is such a waste. How can you do this? I've had people, some guys that were like, really have like beef with me, like, some of them, don't even greet me here. Or even talk to me because I'm lesbian. Not that I care. But it's one of those things where I'm thinking to myself, why?"*.

Similarly, her colleague, Mihle, a masculine presenting lesbian, shared that *"I haven't really listened to every form of discrimination. But do you just have those people, those guys who think they're entitled, and others, they just felt threatened. They stopped talking to me, actually. So now we don't talk."*

The experiences shared by Khanyisa and Mihle point to the subtle yet pervasive nature of homophobia in the workplace often manifested through casual comments and changes in social dynamics. These forms of discrimination, though they might seem less aggressive than overt acts of homophobia, can have a profound impact on the work environment and the psychological well-being of those who experience them (Sears et al, 2021).

Throughout my interview with Khanyisa, she kept emphasising that she does not care about what people at her work say and think about her, this emphasis was repeated throughout the entire interview with her, for example in the excerpt below she says:

“It doesn't affect my job. It's just that it comes to a point where it's hard. I know, it doesn't seem to bother me, but it does at the same time. It's like, I don't care. But at the same time, I feel like it's not normal. Like, is there something wrong with us? Why do they behave like I'm doing it for them? Or if would date them, you know, it doesn't really affect my work. But it just got to a point where I feel like I don't care who says what, but at the same time, I know it's not right. It's abnormal, like seriously, some guys don't greet me. Yeah. I don't really care. But it's weird.

I asked if she had programmed herself to not care, and her response was:

“If I care, it's going to really affect my life, you know. I'd rather like focus on something that will advance me and that's not one of the things that would definitely advance me. So, I don't really care. But like I say, when you start to have this kind of conversation, then you realise that there's actually a problem. But you don't see it when it happens every day is like, Oh, well, whatever. But really, I haven't programmed myself I just feel like, that's not something I should put my attention. It's not that important. People that have issues with me, how is that my business? That's how I feel, you know? If you don't like me, that's your thing.”

Even though Khanyisa repeatedly said that she does not care and is seemingly indifferent towards her colleagues' attitudes and comments, her reflections also have contradictions. Her acknowledgment of the issue's suggests that, on some level, these

interactions do impact her. This duality highlights the coping mechanisms individuals often develop to navigate discriminatory environments, even when that discrimination is subtle prejudice, that it is not entirely inconsequential.

Khanyisa's account of colleagues questioning her sexuality under the guise of jest, and Mihle's experience of being socially ostracised, highlight a common issue: the normalisation of homophobic attitudes and behaviours under the cover of workplace banter or social interaction. These incidents, while often dismissed or minimised by others, contribute to a hostile and unwelcoming environment for queer employees, particularly those who are visibly queer or gender non-conforming.

This "casual" form of discrimination is insidious because it can be difficult to address or confront, especially when it is embedded in the everyday culture of a workplace, this can also affect their sense of belonging and potentially their performance at work (Medina, 2022). The impact of such experiences is not just personal but also professional, it contributes to normalising prejudice (Platt and Lenzen, 2013). This makes it harder to address and eradicate, particularly for women as they also often criticised for being too emotional or sensitive, and so when they call attention to these issues, it further complicates their ability to confront or challenge discriminatory behaviours resulting in a culture of silence where individuals feel discouraged from speaking out against discrimination, for fear of being labelled as dramatic or problematic (Maji et al, 2024).

Furthermore, the prevalence of subtle biases and microaggressions in the workplace is a critical issue. While these incidents may not constitute overt discrimination, they nonetheless contribute to a work environment that feels less inclusive and safe for Black lesbians. This subtlety in discrimination can be more challenging to address because it often goes unrecognised or is dismissed by those not directly affected by it (Maji et al, 2024).

As mentioned previously, discrimination can be both subtle and overt, and some participants in the study have experienced forms of prejudice that are directly linked to homophobic discrimination. Naledi, who pursued a career in law with intention of advocating for those unable to speak for themselves, encountered significant barriers

in entering the job market that were linked to her sexual orientation. Despite her qualifications and ambition, she found herself unemployed two years after graduation, a situation that is not uncommon in South Africa, given the high youth unemployment rate (StatsSA, 2024). However, her experiences during job interviews suggest that the challenges she faced were not merely due to the competitive job market but were linked tied to her sexual orientation and gender expression, as a masculine presenting lesbian.

During the interview, she recalls telling a friend of an incident where all applicants, including herself were hired on the spot. There were four of them, and she was the only one of them who was visibly queer. When she showed up on Monday for her first day of work, she was told that they made a mistake, and they couldn't take her anymore. She says that afterwards *"my friend then discovered or came up with a theory said, the reason why you're not getting jobs at these interviews, it's because you look queer."* I then probed how she looked queer, to which she responded, *"I look masculine presenting I'm a woman who looks like a man. When people see my name *Naledi, they see a woman's name. And then when I walk into a room, they see a woman who's dressed in a suit and they like no ways".*

What was surprising about this was that in a cutthroat profession such as law, I would have thought that this difference would be beneficial. I then asked Naledi, *"I would think that law is a very male dominant masculine profession. And so that should have been an advantage if anything?"*, to which she responded, *"people are homophobic, even people in suits and to my surprise, different people with education and information are still stuck in their ways".*

Naledi's struggle to find employment in her chosen profession due to her obvious queerness is a clear example of how these prejudices can directly impact career opportunities and professional growth, translating into overtly discriminatory actions against individuals who look and are queer. Once Naledi took her friend's advice to heart, she says that *"the next interview I got, we got a friend of ours who worked at the makeup stall at Edgar's to make me up and dressed me up as a feminine woman for my next interview and I got the job".*

While this may seem like a unique, isolated experience, it does point to the broader issue of conformity to societal norms and expectations, particularly in professional settings, and the lingering effects of heteronormativity and discrimination become apparent. In the following section, the discussion will shift to adaptive behaviours to discrimination, specifically focusing on the strategic concealment of sexual orientation and what motivates people to do so.

Navigating Discrimination through the Strategic Concealment of Sexual Orientation

One of the internal negotiations that queer individuals must make in order to fit in and assimilate, is 'coming out', and like other queer individuals, Black lesbians also sometimes assess the risks and benefits of revealing their sexual orientation, both in their personal and professional spaces, a point also stressed by (Giraud and Leonard, 2024). For example, Vicky, mentioned that she had not experienced any homophobia or discrimination related to her sexuality. But she was cautious with whom she revealed her sexual orientation in the workplace, fearing that as a Black woman in a white male dominated space, she did not want to risk being fully out with her superiors, as she worries it may hinder her career progression.

When asked if being out to certain people was calculated, she says that *"I think it's partly a bit calculated. I told you, in theory, there shouldn't be any issue because our deputy CEO is a white gay man. I think I'm a bit calculated because I don't think I'm going to get the same privileges as him if I'm actually just explicitly out, especially to the people who would be responsible for things like promotions."*

This strategic concealment, as noted in Vicky's reflection, is often driven by a fear of compounding existing prejudices related to race and gender with additional biases against their sexual orientation, emphasising the argument by Maciel and Barnett that, "closeted individuals may be weighing the risks and benefits of disclosing their sexual orientation, as they would with any other personal information" (2021: 1121). Furthermore, Vicky's experience brings to light the importance of representation in leadership roles. The presence of an out gay white male deputy CEO does not

necessarily translate to an inclusive environment for all queer employees, especially when intersectional identities are considered.

Even outside of corporate work environments, Black lesbians, employ calculated outness, to mitigate potential homophobia. Such as in the example of respondent, Mandisa, who is a hairdresser. She revealed that she is not out with all her clients and her reason being, *“because of the treatment that I'm going to get from the community society. You never know maybe you can get fired because of being lesbian. I don't feel safe, so I try hide that about myself. The stories I hear about LGBT victims, force me to hide my sexuality”*.

The fear of losing clients, facing community backlash, or even jeopardising personal safety leads to a cautious approach towards revealing their sexual orientation. This calculated concealment is a defence mechanism against potential homophobia, rooted in the awareness of the societal stigma and discrimination faced by the queer community. Mandisa's reference to the stories of LGBT victims is a stark reminder of the real dangers faced by sexual minorities, particularly in environments where homophobic attitudes are prevalent.

The necessity to hide one's sexual orientation in such settings is indicative of the pervasive nature of homophobia in society, transcending workplace boundaries. For individuals like Mandisa, their professional space is not just a place of employment but also a social environment where societal norms and prejudices are actively at play. The decision to be discreet about one's sexuality in these contexts is not merely a personal choice but a survival strategy.

This strategy, however, can come at a cost, often leading to feelings of isolation, stress, and the psychological burden of leading a double life. The constant vigilance and self-censorship can be emotionally exhausting and detrimental to one's mental health and well-being (Fienstein and Renteria, 2023; Mayeza, 2021).

The experiences of individuals like Mandisa highlight the importance understanding workplace dynamics in a variety of settings, and not just in corporate settings but also in smaller businesses (which may fall into the category of informal work, but they are

workplaces nonetheless) and community spaces, where much of daily life and interaction occur.

For the most part, the strategic concealment and choosing when to be out is largely a response to fear of discrimination. People are not born afraid of one thing or the other, but it is a coping mechanism that is learnt through social conditioning that stems from and is reinforced by a variety of sources.

For example, terms like sexual minority highlight the deviation from the majority, reinforcing a sense of separateness even as they seek to create inclusion. Even the concept of inclusion presupposes that by default, if you are queer, you are out. When people are constantly reminded that they are marginalised, it only makes sense for fear to be one of the rational responses. In addition, religion, culture, social norms are all deeply ingrained with heteronormativity, and as many participants in this study shared, they grew up in environments where being queer is viewed as a deviation from the norm. All of these and other factors contribute to othering queer people, and this othering creates divisions of difference that perpetuate fear.

This next section then considers the social factors that contribute to the norms that perpetuate how discrimination is felt and feared by queer individuals, and how it is reinforced through societal structures and interactions.

Socialisation and Gender Performance

This study found that what is considered appropriate for an individual's gender has an influence on how certain people are accepted or not. For LGBTQ+ individuals, and particularly for those who identify as butch or femme within the lesbian community, gender performance is also a means of expressing their sexual orientation and when this challenges traditional gender norms, it can be a challenge that can lead to discrimination.

Revisiting the anecdote from Naledi, the incident she recalls, where she was rejected from a job opportunity because of her appearance, we can see how her gender identity

and expression intersect with her sexual orientation, and the implications of that. Her masculine presentation (a gender performance), which deviates from traditional gender norms, appears to have played a significant role in the hiring decisions at that job, overshadowing her qualifications and potential as a lawyer. This form of discrimination was not just about her sexual orientation but also about how her gender expression challenges societal norms, particularly in a field like law, which often adheres to conservative dress codes.

In a study titled 'LGBTQ Women, Appearance Negotiations, and Workplace Dress Code', the authors argue that "these rejections of female masculinities are situated within the expectation of female femininities that are upheld within our patriarchal society. One place where this hierarchy of gender and sexuality norms is maintained is in the workplace" (Reddy-Best, 2018: 615).

Moreover, this type of discrimination against women who are masculine or butch presenting is reflective of broader discomfort in society when individuals do not neatly adhere to gender binaries (Vaid-Menon, 2020). This contributes to gender policing, where in some way or another, those who do not follow the scripts of their heteronormative gender category, they are 'forced' into conforming by either shaming, stigma or being ostracised.

The persistence of gender norms is evident in various aspects of life. It is not just at the workplace where individuals feel they are expected to conform and perform the gender that is linked to the sex, i.e. male=man, female=woman, but also everyday social life. Mihle grew up in a small conservative town in the Free State and lived in the 'closet' until well into her twenties when she moved to Johannesburg. Mihle not only hid her sexual orientation, but also suppressed her gender expression in maintaining a feminine appearance. She reflects that *"it was a challenging at home. Obviously, we were not open enough to be themselves. You see people that are different, not a typical girl or guy. But we can't fully explore that because of people's mindsets and the environment. So, it was a challenge having to wear skirts and be feminine when I didn't feel like that"*.

In Mihle's case, the expectation to maintain a feminine appearance, despite her inclination towards a more masculine presentation, highlights the deep-rooted societal insistence on aligning gender expression with assigned sex at birth. This insistence not only stifles individual expression but also reinforces rigid gender binaries that fail to accommodate the diversity of human experiences and identities.

Synthesised Discussion

Together these findings directly link intersectionality and queer economics, and they suggest that economic questions, such as labour market outcomes, promotion, and pay, need to be intentional about addressing sexual orientation in their inquiries. This study uses intersectionality first and foremost to understand how the multiple identities of Black lesbians in Johannesburg interact to impact their socioeconomic realities. The findings also indicate that discrimination has various forms, from overt to subvert and that this does not only have a social impact but has economic implications as well.

Typically, one would expect these findings to be revealed in economic outcomes such as employment status, wages etc, but what this study argues that even when Black lesbians have stable jobs and income, their discomfort in the workplace, because of either discrimination they have received or are fearful of, is a negative economic outcome based on homo prejudice. Therefore, it is conceivable that navigating what to say, when to say it, and who to say it to, concerning one's sexual orientation in the workplace, means that queer people must invest more effort in managing workplace dynamics and discrimination. Even when queer individuals are 'out', some must cope with microaggressions and workplace hostility, that may impede their professional development.

Moreover, the strategic concealment of sexual orientation for economic survival is another negative economic outcome for Black lesbians, and using queer economics, we can make the link between how such decisions can be understood as responses to economic pressures and potential discrimination that can influence job security and professional relationships. Finally, participants' experiences reveal a lack of queer representation, which can influence their economic opportunities. This study outlines why this is important for the inclusion and participation for queer people in the labour

market. This study also shows how societal norms around gender performance and sexuality can lead to economic disadvantages for those who do not conform. While this was a slighter smaller section of the study, it is a key interest area for queer economics as it investigates the economic penalties associated with non-conformity to heteronormative standards, and so it remains an important area of future research.

Within the realm of inequality, the findings discussed have confirmed the multiplicity of inequality, and various factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class etc add depth to the discrimination that individuals may experience. The study also highlighted how structural inequalities are reinforced by societal attitudes and biases. These systemic issues contribute to persistent economic and social disparities that may be felt more acutely by marginalised groups.

Inequality is also evident in the visibility and representation of queer individuals in the workplace. Lack of representation can lead to feelings of isolation and a sense that certain spaces and roles are inaccessible, which can contribute to power asymmetries that breed monoculturalism both in our social and economic domains.

Essentially, these findings emphasise that inequality is equally a social and economic issue because of social structures and cultural norms that contribute to marginalising certain groups, diminishing both their economic and social inclusion.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an analysis of how intersecting identities, such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, influence socio-economic realities and encounters with discrimination within both social and workplace settings. The findings of this study also highlighted the varied nature of discrimination, which ranges from subtle bias to more overt forms, as well as the strategic concealment of sexual orientation by some as a coping mechanism against potential biases.

In conversation with queer economics, feminist economics and intersectionality, this study found that the intersection of multiple identities is indeed an intensifier of discrimination. It also reaffirms these theoretical foundations by showing how these

intersecting identities contribute to complex and layered experiences for Black lesbians in both social and professional contexts. The findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge by demonstrating the interconnectedness of race, gender, and sexual orientation in shaping social experiences within the workplace, and broader social life.

Moreover, the diverse profiles of participants show the heterogeneity within the Black lesbian community, which is illustrative of the spectrum that exists within sexual orientation and gender expressions. The findings have then shown how this influences encounters of discrimination in public spaces, the workplace and what role that plays in socialisation.

The findings laid out in this chapter highlight the need for further discussions on what policies need to be put in place for more inclusive workplaces for LGBTQ+ individuals with intersecting identities. The findings also highlight the need for more research that explores how we understand discrimination and the ways in which we can promote inclusivity at interpersonal levels, within our communities and all of our social spaces.

Chapter Five: Recommendations for Future Research

Future Research

There are several areas for future research to enhance our understanding of how intersectionality influences both social interactions and economic participation for LGBTQ+ individuals in society. This research is crucial in informing how to better approach the many dimensions of inequality that exist in South African society, as well as understanding and addressing all the ways in which the economic and social burden of discrimination acts against queer individual. This requires a concerted effort from policymakers, employers, and researchers alike.

Firstly, there is a need for research that explores the intersections within intersections. For example, a comparative analysis of intersectional discrimination in different socio-economic contexts within South Africa. Such studies could provide a deeper understanding of how intersectional identities impact individuals in rural versus urban settings or in different economic sectors. Additionally, this study has uncovered how within the spectrum of sexual orientation i.e. femme and butch gender expressions produce different experiences. This warrants further investigation into how these gender expressions intersect with other identity factors such as race, class, and age to influence individuals' experiences in both social and professional spheres. Investigating these nuances will offer richer insights into the varied ways discrimination is manifested and experienced by individuals within the LGBTQ+ community.

Another critical area for future research is how microaggression is a harmful form of discrimination. All too often seemingly innocent or innocuous statements, banter have become normalised, and they continue to fly under the radar, unregistered as harmful or hostile. Therefore, studies could explore both the damage of subtle and overt discrimination, how they affect individuals, their implications on social cohesion, and how they affect the wellness and productivity of LGBTQ+ individuals in the economy.

In relation, there is a gap in research on the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in relation to economic opportunities. Future research should explore how these

intersecting identities impact access to employment, career advancement, and economic well-being. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing holistic approaches to addressing discrimination and inequality. Therefore, there remains a need for deliberate attempts to build a body of knowledge of queer economic research.

This study briefly uncovered differences in how discrimination was encountered more by older participants compared to younger ones, indicating that future research should focus on longitudinal studies that examine the long-term effects of discrimination on the lives of Black lesbians. These studies could provide insights into how discrimination evolves over time and the cumulative impact of intersecting identities on individuals' socio-economic status and well-being. This could involve longitudinal studies that track changes over time in organisational cultures, societal attitudes, and individual experiences of discrimination. Norms, cultures, inclusion, and exclusion operate within generational shifts; therefore, this kind of research could identify gaps in existing policies and highlight areas where additional support or new strategies are needed. We need to know what has changed, what still works and what does not currently resonate with the times to better tailor how effective diversity and inclusion initiatives can be.

Further studies should also investigate the importance of the perception of Johannesburg as 'Mecca' for people seeking economic and social freedom in South Africa. Johannesburg is South Africa's biggest economic hub (Gauteng Treasury, 2024) (Oxford Economics, 2024), and the allure to the city is evident. However, based on the findings in this study, the lived experiences of queer people in navigating these spaces requires a closer examination into how sexual orientation influences both social and economic opportunities, experiences and outcomes.

This is because despite Johannesburg being an economic powerhouse, Johannesburg is also a site with visible spatial inequalities, thus, future research should explore how the aforementioned allure of Johannesburg intersects with the everyday lived realities of discrimination, exclusion, and marginalisation in both social and professional spheres. Studies should investigate whether the city of gold truly delivers on the promises of economic and social freedom for queer individuals, or if sociopolitical barriers persist in limiting their access to opportunities.

Finally, the role of allyship in promoting inclusivity and equality deserves attention. All too often “Pride” is the responsibility of queer people. They shoulder the burden to carve space, room, and acceptance of their identities. Research into how allyship from outside the LGBTQI+ community can contribute to shifting societal norms and reducing discrimination is essential for shifting this burden. This research should focus on how allyship can operate across social, cultural, and professional contexts. This understanding could lead to the development of approaches that are effective in promoting environments of acceptance and support in specific work contexts and society more broadly.

Conclusion

This study’s findings revealed the ways in which discrimination manifests not only as overt acts of prejudice and direct homophobia but also through subtle microaggressions. The findings resonate with existing literature on intersectionality by highlighting that there is a need to consider the importance of multiple identities in analysing social and economic inequalities.

Building on this foundation, this research makes a contribution to the field of queer economics and inequality studies by recognising the influence of social identities on socioeconomic dynamics. This study also brought attention to how heteronormative expectations and discrimination shape the lives of queer individuals. This recognition is crucial for developing policies and practices that address the root causes of inequality and support the well-being of queer individuals in our society.

Furthermore, the insights from this study urge us to broaden the scope of economic inquiries to include the impacts of social structures and norms in and outside of the workplace, thereby enriching our understanding of discrimination in a deeply interconnected social system.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Guideline

1. Introduction

Please tell me about yourself, including your age, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.

2. Socioeconomic Background

Could you provide a summary of your life history and current circumstances, such as family composition, where you went to school, education level, occupation, etc.

3. Employment Experiences

Could you share your experiences in the job market?

Have you encountered any challenges or discrimination in finding employment, as well as challenges or discrimination in keeping a job and opportunities for career growth?

Has your sexual orientation intersected with your employment experiences?

Have you faced any specific challenges, discrimination, or biases as a Black lesbian in the workplace? Both in terms of doing your job and socialisation with your colleagues?

How does your workplace environment influence your economic and social well-being?

Are there any policies or practices that you think affect your job security, promotions, or career opportunities?

4. Discrimination and Intersectionality

How do you perceive the intersectionality of your gender, race, class, and sexual orientation in relation to your experiences of social and economic inclusion and well-being?

Have societal attitudes and norms influenced your access to opportunities for social mobility as a Black lesbian and in what ways?

5. Social Inclusion and Economic Well-being

In your own words, how would you define social inclusion and economic well-being, and what factors contribute to that?

What aspects are important for your economic well-being?

What do you believe are the key factors that contribute to someone feeling socially included?

6. Final Thoughts

Is there anything else you would like to share about your economic and social experiences as a Black lesbian?

Appendix B

Participant Information Sheet

Hello,

My name is Vuyokazi Futshane. I am a Masters student in Inequality Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisors are Dr Hannah Dawson and Mr. David Francis. I am conducting a research study about the economic and social implications of stigma and discrimination, and how they impact black lesbians in Johannesburg. The study title is 'A Queer Economic Study: Exploring the Economic and Social Burden of Discrimination Against Black Lesbians in Johannesburg.'

I am inviting you to take part in an interview. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about an hour, with the possibility of a follow up interview. The interview will take place at a place you are comfortable meeting at, an agreed upon time and date.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. This data will be stored in Wits University Digital Storage for three years and/or deleted after three years. Only the researcher and the supervisors will have access to the data.

During the research activity, I will need to ask for some personal information about you, including your sexual orientation, race, gender, class and general demographic information and your social and economic lived experiences in that regard.

The interview will be confidential and anonymous. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to take part. You can stop being in the study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not get any

direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights you would normally have if you decided not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything.

This research study will be written up as a mini dissertation. The dissertation will be available on the university library website. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,
Vuyokazi Futshane

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David Francis, david.francis@wits.ac.za, 011 717 1790

Appendix C

Ethical Clearance



SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND FINANCE ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: CBUSE2131

PROJECT TITLE

A Queer Economic Study: Exploring the Economic and Social Burden of Discrimination against Black Lesbians in Johannesburg.

INVESTIGATOR

Ms Vuyokazi Futshane

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR

School of Economics and Finance

DATE CONSIDERED

18 August 2023

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

Conditionally Approved

Conditional Clearance: Certificate issued subject to the PGSC approval of the research proposal. The Investigator is required to apply for an amendment if the outcome of the PGSC deviates from the contents of the conditional ethical clearance certificate.

RISK LEVEL

Low Risk

EXPIRY DATE

31 March 2027

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 28 August 2023

CHAIRPERSON


(Dr Sibulele Nkunzi)

cc: Supervisor: Mr David Francis

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I/we fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved, I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee.



Signature

31 / August / 2023

Date

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES