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Path dependence in gendered employment during apartheid and how it impacts contemporary gender norms in South Africa’s labour force

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2025
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Mdekazi, Nomalungelo . (2024). Path dependence in gendered employment during apartheid and how it impacts contemporary gender norms in South Africa’s labour force [Master’s dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg].

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Path dependence in gendered employment during apartheid and how it impacts contemporary gender norms in South Africa's labour force

A Research Report submitted in partial fulfilment of the Degree of

Master of Commerce (Applied Development Economics)

In the School of Economics and Finance,

University of the Witwatersrand

by

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Word Count: 14772

31 March 2025

Abstract

This study examines the role of the South African education system in perpetuating gendered employment patterns through path dependence. Using a historical-institutional approach, it investigates how apartheid-era educational policies shaped gender disparities in the labour market. By analysing education and employment data, the research explores whether structural inequalities in schooling have led to persistent occupational segregation. The findings contribute to understanding the long-term effects of historical policies on gendered employment and inform strategies for addressing inequality in education and labour markets. This study highlights the need for policy interventions to break the cycle of gender-based occupational stratification.

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1. Introduction

The persistence of gender disparities in South Africa's labour market remains a pressing concern, with women disproportionately represented in lower-paying, less secure employment sectors (UN Women, 2024). These patterns of inequality are not just modern issues but were solidified through the institutional structures of apartheid (Ocampo, 2004). During apartheid, the education system, such as the Bantu Education, was deliberately designed to reinforce racial and gender hierarchies, denying equal opportunities to marginalised groups and perpetuating systemic inequities that persist today (Ocampo, 2004).

This study examines the enduring legacy of those policies, specifically exploring how South Africa's education system has contributed to the path dependence of gendered employment patterns. The study aims to answer the following research question: **How does the South African education system contribute to the path dependence of gendered employment patterns?**

Path dependence exists when the result of a process relies on its past events, on a sequence of decisions made by agents and the subsequent outcomes they produce, extending beyond current circumstances. Hodgson (1993) posits that "the future of an economic system is affected by the path it has traced out in the past." The strength of the path dependence framework stems from its proponents' emphasis on the critical significance of the particular sequence of historical events at the micro level (Ruttan, 1997).

In South Africa, apartheid-era policies constrained women's access to quality education and professional opportunities, thereby limiting their participation in skilled labour markets. Despite the formal dismantling of apartheid, the labour market continues to reflect these structural barriers (UN Women, 2024). While extensive research has been conducted on racial disparities in education and employment, the gendered dimensions of these issues remain underexplored, particularly in relation to path dependence and the interplay between historical education policies and current employment outcomes.

The contribution of this paper lies in the unique corpus it examines: historical educational policies, labour market statistics, and qualitative accounts from the apartheid and post-apartheid

eras. By critically analysing this body of evidence through the lenses of path dependence and social reproduction theories, the paper provides a nuanced understanding of how apartheid-era educational frameworks have shaped contemporary gendered employment trends. These theoretical approaches help illustrate how historical structures continue to influence present-day labour market outcomes, reinforcing cycles of inequality. This study not only highlights the enduring consequences of historical injustices but also underscores the urgent need for interventions that address the structural barriers perpetuating gender inequality in the labour market.

This research aims to bridge the gap in the literature by uncovering the mechanisms through which South Africa's education system contributes to the persistence of gendered employment patterns. In doing so, it adds to the growing body of work on institutional legacies and their impact on socio-economic development, with a specific focus on gender equity. The findings have important implications for policymakers seeking to design interventions that disrupt these historical trajectories and promote a more equitable labour market.

This research paper examines the persistent impact of historical inequalities on contemporary labour market outcomes in South Africa, with a particular focus on the role of education in shaping gendered employment patterns. Section 2 establishes the theoretical foundation by linking path dependence and social reproduction to labour market segmentation, illustrating how historical inequalities continue to shape present-day employment structures. Section 3.1 explores the social reproduction theory, explaining how social and economic capital is transmitted across generations, reinforcing systemic barriers to economic mobility. Section 3.2 explores the intersection of education and social inequality, analysing how disparities in access to quality education perpetuate structural disadvantages, particularly for marginalised groups. Building on this, Section 3.3 examines labour market segmentation, emphasising how educational inequalities and social reproduction contribute to occupational stratification and wage disparities. Section 4 presents a discussion of the findings, synthesising key insights and assessing their broader implications for policy and economic development. Finally, Section 5 provides a conclusion, summarising the study's main arguments and offering recommendations for addressing entrenched inequalities in South Africa's education system and labour market.

2. From Path Dependence and Social Reproduction to Labour Market Segmentation

2.1. Structural Inequalities in Education and Employment: A Theoretical Perspective

2.1.1. Introduction

This theoretical framework examines the relationship between apartheid's effects and contemporary gendered employment patterns in South Africa. It is grounded in the concept of path dependence theory, which suggests that historical institutional decisions create self-reinforcing mechanisms that perpetuate inequality over time. In this context, apartheid-era labour and education policies established rigid structures that continue to influence the labour market today. Furthermore, education remains a key determinant of economic development, with (Ozturk, 2001) highlighting its role in enhancing productivity and increasing individual income per capita. By integrating feminist theory, intersectionality, and path dependence, this framework provides a foundation for understanding the persistence of gendered employment inequalities.

2.1.2. Historical Context and Institutional Inequalities

The apartheid system in South Africa institutionalised racial and gender inequalities, creating structural barriers that continue to shape labour market dynamics. Path dependence theory explains how these historical inequalities have persisted despite policy reforms, as entrenched institutions and social norms maintain exclusionary patterns. As Nattrass and Seekings (2001) note, the racially segregated labour market established deep and enduring disparities that have proven resistant to change. These institutionalised inequalities set a precedent for gender discrimination, where women—particularly black women—were systematically confined to low-paying, informal employment with restricted opportunities for upward mobility.

2.1.3. Gender Norms and Segregation

The persistence of gendered employment patterns in South Africa can be attributed to the long-term effects of apartheid policies, which reinforced occupational segregation. Segalo (2015) conducted a study on women participating in an embroidery project in Gauteng, revealing that despite political changes, economic and social inequalities remain deeply entrenched. One participant noted: *"Where you come from determines what you get access to"* (Segalo, 2015). Path dependence theory underscores how initial discriminatory policies create reinforcing cycles, making it difficult for historically marginalised groups to break free from inherited disadvantages. Feminist theories further argue that gender roles are socially constructed and maintained through cultural norms and institutional policies, reinforcing occupational segregation in contemporary labour markets (Gradín, 2021).

2.1.4. Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality is crucial for understanding how race, gender, and class interact to shape employment outcomes in South Africa. Black women, in particular, experience cumulative disadvantage, as their exclusion from quality education and high-status jobs during apartheid continues to limit their career trajectories. Path dependence theory highlights that once inequalities become embedded in institutions, they generate self-reinforcing mechanisms that sustain disparities (Pierson, 2000). This framework recognises that the lingering effects of apartheid are not uniform, and individuals' social identities shape their access to economic opportunities.

2.1.5. Path Dependence and Hypothesis Connection

This study posits that despite policy advancements since 1994, gender segregation and unequal opportunities persist in the South African labour market due to path-dependent mechanisms. Historical inequalities have created a recursive process in which marginalised groups struggle to access high-paying, high-status employment due to limited educational opportunities, discriminatory hiring practices, and persistent social norms. Even though policies were

implemented, post-1994, to improve equality and allow access to opportunities for all demographic groups, segregation still remains a huge issue in South Africa. This stems from deeply entrenched structural inequalities in the education and labour markets. Social reproduction and path dependence ensure that historical disadvantages persist despite policy changes, reinforcing cycles of exclusion. Research by Posel & Rogan (2009) and Francis (2020) supports this assertion, showing that while female labour force participation has increased, women remain concentrated in lower-paying jobs with restricted career mobility. Path dependence theory provides a critical lens for understanding how initial conditions established under apartheid continue to shape employment patterns despite legislative reforms.

2.2. Research Methodology

2.2.1. Introduction to Methodology

The study will make use of existing literature to understand and form an opinion on gender issues in the South African employment regime. The point of the study is to understand how history has created the current work environment and opportunities. Hence, the history of South Africa will be studied, and examined how this has affected the South African labour force gender dynamics in post-apartheid years.

This section outlines the research methodology used to investigate how South Africa's education system contributes to the persistence of gendered employment patterns. Given the historical and structural nature of the research question, this study adopts a qualitative approach. The methodology is structured as follows: first, the research design is described; second, the search strategy is explained; third, the method of data synthesis is detailed; and finally, the potential limitations of the approach are discussed.

2.2.2. Research Design

This research will employ a systematic review methodology. This approach is the most suitable for addressing the research question, as it provides a framework for synthesising a large body of

existing literature on the historical factors that aim to elucidate the impact of historical factors on contemporary gender norms. Understanding history through the analysis of existing literature enables a comprehensive examination of these effects. The systematic methodology ensures that the findings are not based on isolated studies but on broader, well-rounded examination of persistent gender inequalities in employment. This method reduces bias by following a structured protocol for literature selection, enhancing the validity of the conclusions drawn.

2.2.3. Search Strategy

The study will utilise search engines such as Google Scholar, PubMed, JSTOR, EconLit, and Scopus to identify relevant literature. The initial selection of studies will be based on their titles, with the abstracts providing additional clarity on the suitability of each study for inclusion in the evidence-gathering process. To ensure a comprehensive review, studies will be selected based on the following criteria: (1) relevance to the topic of gendered employment in South Africa; (2) the historical context of apartheid and its consequences; (3) publication in peer-reviewed journals or credible academic sources; and (4) publication date, with preference given to studies published post-apartheid to capture contemporary analyses and relevant apartheid insights will be included. Additionally, government reports, policy papers, and historical records relevant to the study of labour and gender will also be considered. The literature chosen will focus on gendered employment but also incorporate related themes such as race and economic inequality.

2.2.4. Data Synthesis

The study will analyse various sources to create a coherent and logical review. The findings will be presented in a narrative conclusion. As the study will not involve numerical data, there will be no use of tables or graphs.

2.2.5. Limitations

This research is subject to several limitations that may influence its findings and interpretations. Firstly, the study encounters constraints related to the availability and reliability of historical data on apartheid-era education policies and their gendered implications. Archival records from the period under investigation are often inconsistent, while contemporary datasets may inadequately capture nuances within informal labour markets or the interplay of intersectional inequalities.

Secondly, the complexity of establishing a direct causal linkage between apartheid-era educational policies and current gendered employment patterns poses a methodological challenge. Over the intervening decades, structural shifts, including economic reforms, globalisation, and societal transformations, have introduced confounding variables that may obscure the specific mechanisms of path dependence.

Furthermore, the scope of this study is confined by its emphasis on gender within the education system, which may insufficiently account for the intersecting influences of race, socioeconomic status, and regional disparities. These factors are integral to employment outcomes and warrant deeper examination beyond the constraints of this research.

The reliance on secondary data sources further limits the capacity to incorporate granular, individual-level perspectives that could illuminate the lived experiences underpinning broader patterns. Additionally, while the analytical framework of path dependence effectively highlights the persistence of historical inequities, it may inadequately capture instances of discontinuity or transformative change within the system.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a critical foundation for understanding the enduring impact of historical educational policies on gendered employment trajectories in South Africa. It offers valuable insights into the mechanisms of path dependence and sets the stage for future interdisciplinary research in this domain.

3. Unpacking Labour Market Segmentation: A Review of Structural and Institutional Barriers

This section explores three interconnected themes. First, the concept of social reproduction is examined to understand how societal structures perpetuate inequality across generations. Second, the role of education in reinforcing social inequality is analysed, with a focus on how disparities in educational access and quality translate into labour market disadvantages. Lastly, the discussion turns to labour market segmentation, assessing how education and social reproduction interact to create distinct economic opportunities (or limitations) for different social groups. Through this analysis, the review highlights how education serves not only as a means of skill acquisition but also as a mechanism for maintaining social hierarchies, ultimately shaping employment patterns and economic disparities in South Africa. Moreover, this section analyses the influence of each concept on social class, racial dynamics, and gender relations.

3.1. Social Reproduction

The origins of the Social Reproduction Theory are from Marx's critique of the capitalist society (Weiss, H. 2021). Weiss describes social reproduction as a "lens through which to analyse the persistence of society over time, even as its human and material components keep changing." The leading point of this theory is to organise temporary and constantly changing things and people into categories, roles, and behavioural patterns that go beyond their individual existence (Weiss, H. 2021).

The following sections will further explore the concept of social reproduction, beginning with a more detailed explanation of what social reproduction entails and the key theories associated with it. This will be followed by an examination of the theory of resistance. Additionally, the discussion will highlight the relationship between social reproduction and path dependence, illustrating how historical social structures continue to shape contemporary economic and social outcomes. Lastly, the paper will explore the interconnectedness of Social Reproduction, Path Dependence, and Intersectionality, demonstrating how factors such as race, gender, and class interact within these frameworks to influence individual and collective experiences in society.

3.1.1. The theories of Social Reproduction

The persistence of social inequality in South Africa's education system and labour market is not a coincidence but the result of entrenched structural mechanisms that actively reproduce disparities. Social reproduction theory, as advanced by Bourdieu, Bowles and Gintis, and Marx, provides a critical framework for understanding how these inequalities are maintained across generations. Bourdieu's theory of capital highlights how access to cultural, social, and economic capital is systematically restricted, reinforcing class and racial hierarchies. Cultural capital—knowledge, language, and behaviours aligned with dominant social norms—acts as an invisible gatekeeper to success, favouring those already embedded within elite circles (Bourdieu, 1986). Similarly, social capital—networks and connections—dictates access to opportunities, while economic capital directly influences access to quality education and social mobility. Under apartheid, black South Africans were systematically denied these forms of capital, ensuring that the economic and social advantages of white South Africans remained unchanged. The post-apartheid era has not dismantled these inequalities but rather reinforced them through an education system that continues to privilege historically advantaged groups. This reality undermines meritocratic narratives that suggest hard work alone determines success, as access to essential resources remains heavily skewed (Ocampo, 2004).

Bowles and Gintis's "Correspondence Principle" further challenges the notion that education serves as a great equaliser. Instead, they argue that schooling is designed to reproduce existing class structures by conditioning students for predetermined economic roles (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In South Africa, this dynamic is particularly evident in the significant divide between well-resourced former white schools and underfunded township and rural schools. Historically disadvantaged students are often subjected to rigid, discipline-focused curricula that prepare them for low-wage, subordinate roles, while wealthier students receive education that fosters critical thinking, leadership, and upward mobility. As Spaull (2013) highlights, the quality of education for most black children remains poor, perpetuating cycles of poverty and unemployment. The National Planning Commission (2012) echoes this, stating that poor education denies many black South Africans access to skilled employment and limits career progression, effectively reinforcing racial and class-based labour market segmentation. This is

not an accidental outcome but a direct consequence of an education system that continues to function in service of economic elites.

Marx's theory of economic determinism further elucidates how capitalist structures sustain these inequalities. Marx (1867) argued that education is not a neutral institution but a tool used by the ruling class to maintain economic dominance. While South Africa has undergone political transformation, its economic structures remain largely unchanged, ensuring that wealth and power remain concentrated among historically privileged groups (Theron, 2006). The persistence of poverty among black South Africans is not simply a remnant of apartheid but a feature of a capitalist system that requires a surplus of cheap labour to sustain elite economic interests. This structural entrenchment of inequality contradicts the post-apartheid government's promises of transformation, highlighting the limitations of political change without economic restructuring.

By integrating Bourdieu's theory of capital, Bowles and Gintis's correspondence principle, and Marx's economic determinism, it becomes evident that inequality in South Africa's education system and labour market is systematically reproduced rather than naturally occurring. These theories challenge reductionist explanations that attribute success solely to individual effort, exposing the deep-seated historical and structural barriers that continue to dictate economic and social mobility. The illusion of progress masks the reality that apartheid-era inequalities remain firmly embedded in contemporary South Africa, ensuring that privilege and deprivation persist along racial, gender, and class lines. If left unchallenged, these structures will continue to uphold the socio-economic status quo, making genuine transformation an elusive goal.

3.1.2. The theory of resistance

From the theories of social reproduction to the theory of resistance, as articulated by Fernandes (1988), the theory of resistance emerged from significant theoretical and empirical studies on how schools perpetuate social and cultural inequalities. These investigations, which began in the 1960s, challenged the earlier deterministic view that schools inherently maintain social hierarchies. While theories of social reproduction have been instrumental in understanding the mechanisms through which the education system operates, they often adopt a rigid and

deterministic stance, assuming that schools inevitably reproduce social inequality while neglecting the dynamic power relations and interactions within them (Fernandes, 1988).

This deterministic perspective, according to Fernandes (1988), fosters a pessimistic outlook, undermining the agency of individuals—particularly educators—in resisting systemic inequalities. It suggests that teachers are powerless in the face of structural reproduction and disregards the potential for developing alternative curricula, teaching methodologies, and educational resources aimed at challenging inequality. Such a viewpoint, Fernandes argues, has often served as a rationale for inaction among educators and social scientists, curbing efforts to design equitable educational practices.

However, Fernandes (1988) notes that schools are not entirely subservient to the economic system, government, or dominant social classes. Their limited autonomy arises from tensions within dominant groups (e.g., between different business sectors) and conflicts between these groups and educators. Moreover, the diverse social backgrounds of teachers contribute to varying educational approaches, which introduce contradictions and create spaces for alternative practices and ideas. While schools generally tend to reproduce social inequalities, Fernandes contends that these contradictions allow for resistance within the system.

The effectiveness of this limited independence, however, depends on educators actively using and expanding it within the education system. Fernandes (1988) emphasises that while schools cannot single-handedly transform society, educators have the power and responsibility to revise curricula, teaching materials, and methods to confront the existing inequalities embedded within educational structures. This process does not require waiting for broader systemic change but rather begins at the classroom level, where educators can actively challenge the status quo and promote a more inclusive and equitable educational experience. Though dominant groups may resist these efforts, the cultivation of transformative educational practices within schools can lay the foundation for future progress, ensuring that changes within the education system contribute to broader societal transformation. By focusing on liberating and equitable educational practices, educators can foster a space where critical thinking and equity take root, eventually influencing the broader structural changes needed in society.

According to Fernandes (1988), the theory of resistance, as part of the new sociology of education, seeks to transcend deterministic assumptions by focusing on the interplay between

structural forces and individual agency. This framework acknowledges that although reproduction tends to dominate within unequal power dynamics, resistance remains possible. Research grounded in the theory of resistance often advocates for teachers' active intervention in education, including organising curricula, developing innovative teaching materials, and employing new pedagogical methods to combat social inequalities. This research approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on theoretical perspectives such as Marxism, feminism, symbolic interactionism, and methodologies from sociology, psychology, and ethnography.

Education is often seen as a means of upward mobility, but sociological theories of social reproduction suggest that schools play a central role in maintaining existing social hierarchies. Through classifications based on class, race, gender, and other social markers, schools mirror and reinforce the broader structures of domination and subordination in society. However, while schools largely reproduce inequality, they are also spaces where resistance can emerge.

Fernandes' theory of resistance builds on social reproduction theory by highlighting the how agency and resistance operate within structures of oppression. The social reproduction theory argues that education and other social institutions reinforce class, gender, and social hierarchies by transmitting dominant ideologies, ensuring that marginalised groups remain disadvantaged across generations. Fernandes extends this framework by showing that resistance—though often constrained by structural forces—is an inherent part of social reproduction itself. Instead of viewing resistance as an outright break from reproduction, Fernandes argues that acts of defiance, contestation, and negotiation occur within the very structures that reproduce inequality.

Fernandes’ perspective on resistance within social reproduction provides a critical lens through which to understand the persistence of inequality in social institutions like education. However, to fully grasp the structural foundations of social reproduction, it is essential to turn to Marx’s analysis of capitalism. Marx’s theory situates social reproduction within the broader economic system, showing how the production and reproduction of labour sustain class divisions over time. While Fernandes emphasises the role of agency and contestation within structures of oppression, Marx highlights how capitalism systematically reproduces labour as a commodity, ensuring the continued existence of the worker-capitalist relationship. This economic foundation underpins the very inequalities that Fernandes critiques, making Marx’s analysis a crucial starting point for understanding the material basis of social reproduction.

As referenced in Cammack (2020), Marx's Capital, Volume 1, Chapter 23, explores social reproduction, emphasising that production and reproduction are inherently linked. For any society to survive, production must continually renew itself to meet the demands of consumption. Marx argues that the social process of production is simultaneously a process of reproduction—highlighting that the conditions for production are also those for reproduction. In the capitalist system, however, this reproduction primarily concerns maintaining the capital relation by perpetuating the worker class, rather than the reproduction of humanity in general.

For Marx, this perpetual reproduction of workers, who function as "dispossessed producers of surplus value," sustains the capitalist system. Workers' wages are part of "variable capital" allocated by capitalists for labour, constituting a "labour fund" that provides the basic means for workers' subsistence and, indirectly, the renewal of the labour force. Thus, the capitalist indirectly "produces the worker as a wage-labourer," an essential factor for the ongoing production of capital.

Marx points out a contradiction here: capitalism needs an ample supply of labour to sustain production, yet individual capitalists are indifferent to the conditions necessary for the worker's longevity and quality of life. Capitalists, driven by a relentless pursuit of profit, have little incentive to protect the worker's health, leading to a shortening of labourers' lives through extended work hours and harsh conditions. This inherent contradiction illustrates capitalism's tendency toward exploitation that jeopardises the labour force's sustainability, only mitigated by external forces like legislation or labour resistance.

Social reproduction is central here, with Marx noting that just as capital disregards the health and well-being of current workers, it also overlooks the renewal of future labour generations. Instead, capital often presumes a surplus labour pool, underpinned by the belief among political economists like Malthus that population growth poses an ever-present threat. Such views reinforced capitalists' ability to "safely leave" workforce renewal to workers' instincts for self-preservation and reproduction.

Gimenez's analysis further clarifies that capital accumulation tendencies continually produce a "reserve army of labour" through technological advances that displace human labour (Gimenez, 2019). This structural contradiction of capital—that it both depends on and displaces human labour—leads to surplus populations, even as productivity grows. Thus, the capitalist system

inherently creates a surplus labour force, generating chronic unemployment and poverty, particularly in times of economic crisis.

In this context, Marx's view that capitalists could rely on workers to self-reproduce reflects not essentialism but the reality of capitalism's dynamics: it presumes an abundant labour force through both "primitive accumulation" and the structural contradictions of capital itself, which both needs and displaces labour in its constant search for profit maximisation.

Marx's analysis of social reproduction reveals how capitalism perpetuates class structures by continually producing and reproducing the conditions necessary for its survival. The exploitation of labour, the reserve army of workers, and the reliance on workers' self-reproduction ensure that inequalities remain embedded within the system. However, beyond the economic mechanisms outlined by Marx, the persistence of these inequalities can also be understood through the lens of path dependence. Historical social structures do not merely persist; they create self-reinforcing cycles that shape present and future outcomes. This enduring cycle between social reproduction and path dependence helps explain why, despite economic shifts and resistance efforts, entrenched inequalities remain difficult to break. Section 3.1.3 explores this connection, demonstrating how past institutional arrangements continue to influence contemporary social and economic realities.

3.1.3. The Enduring Cycle: The Connection Between Social Reproduction and Path Dependence

Path dependence builds on social reproduction by explaining why these patterns persist over time, even in the absence of formal apartheid policies. Once inequality becomes embedded within institutions, it generates self-reinforcing mechanisms that make change increasingly difficult (Pierson, 2000). In the case of South Africa, the dual education system—where historically white schools continue to offer superior education while many black-majority schools struggle with inadequate resources—creates a recursive process that limits social mobility. Because past educational inequalities shape present labour market outcomes, individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds remain confined to low-wage, precarious employment due to their limited access to high-quality education and professional networks. This demonstrates how social reproduction creates the initial conditions of inequality, while path

dependence ensures that these inequalities persist, making it difficult for historically marginalised groups to break free from cycles of poverty and economic exclusion.

The interplay between social reproduction and path dependence illustrates how historical inequalities are continuously reinforced across generations. However, these processes do not affect all individuals in the same way. Intersectionality provides a lens for understanding how class, race, gender, and other social categories intersect to shape individuals' experiences within these enduring cycles. While social reproduction and path dependence explain the persistence of inequality, intersectionality reveals how different groups navigate and are affected by these structures in distinct ways. Section 3.1.4 examines how these three frameworks—social reproduction, path dependence, and intersectionality—interact to produce complex patterns of privilege and marginalisation in education and the labour market.

3.1.4. Social Reproduction, Path Dependence, and Intersectionality

Bourdieu (1986) theorises social reproduction as the perpetuation of economic, social, and cultural capital across generations, sustaining entrenched structural disparities. This framework is particularly key in the South African context, where race, class, and gender have historically dictated access to these critical resources. Under apartheid, black South Africans were systematically excluded from quality education and economic participation, restricting their ability to accumulate and transfer capital intergenerationally (Spaull, 2013). The formal dismantling of apartheid's legal structures did not equate to the dissolution of its socio-economic legacies. Instead, deeply embedded inequalities persist, raising an important question: if apartheid has formally ended, why do economic and social disparities remain so deeply entrenched?

A compelling explanation lies in the enduring effects of apartheid-era exclusions, which established persistent patterns of class immobility. Unlike their white counterparts, black South Africans were historically deprived of the opportunity to accumulate wealth, cultivate influential networks, and acquire the cultural capital necessary to navigate elite social and economic spaces. This historical dispossession was not a temporary injustice but a structural mechanism that continues to shape contemporary inequalities. Post-apartheid policies, while seemingly designed

towards redress, have largely failed to disrupt these entrenched cycles. Education, a primary vehicle for social mobility, remains profoundly unequal, with underfunded schools producing graduates with limited economic opportunities (Spaull, 2013). Additionally, change is slow because dismantling path dependence requires both policy change and a shift in social attitudes. Consequently, the persistence of these disparities underscores the continued relevance of social reproduction theory in explaining the transmission of racial and class-based inequalities across generations.

South Africa remains deeply stratified, with racial and spatial divisions continuing to shape socio-economic outcomes. White South Africans are predominantly concentrated in urban areas, where access to well-resourced schools is significantly higher, while black South Africans are disproportionately located in rural areas and townships, where educational institutions remain underfunded and reliant on government support. Schools in urban areas often benefit from independent funding mechanisms, such as private contributions and alumni endowments, which enable them to maintain high educational standards, invest in infrastructure, and provide learners with extensive academic resources. In contrast, rural schools depend almost entirely on government allocations, which are often insufficient due to budgetary constraints and broader inefficiencies in public sector management.

This systemic disparity places learners in rural and township schools at a distinct disadvantage, as they lack critical resources such as qualified teachers, well-equipped classrooms, and access to technology—all of which are fundamental to academic success. The state's failure to adequately fund and support these schools exacerbates existing inequalities, reinforcing cycles of poverty and limiting upward mobility for historically marginalised communities. The inadequacies in resource distribution highlight a broader pattern of structural neglect, wherein government policies fail to bridge the historical education gap, thereby perpetuating educational and economic disparities. Without meaningful interventions, learners in these disadvantaged areas remain systematically excluded from opportunities that could enable them to compete on equal footing with their urban counterparts, ultimately sustaining the entrenched socio-economic divide.

However, a focus solely on race and class provides an incomplete analysis of the mechanisms driving social reproduction. Gender, particularly as it intersects with race and class, plays a critical role in reinforcing patterns of marginalisation. Black women, in particular, encounter compounded structural barriers that inhibit their capacity to accumulate and transmit various forms of capital. During apartheid, they were overwhelmingly confined to precarious, low-wage employment in domestic and informal sectors, occupations that neither facilitated upward mobility nor provided access to stable economic resources (United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, 1978). The enduring consequences of this historical exclusion are evident in contemporary labour market dynamics, where black women continue to face systemic wage disparities, higher unemployment rates, and restricted access to leadership roles. More critically, the intersection of economic precarity and caregiving responsibilities reinforces cycles of dependency, limiting opportunities for social advancement. Thus, while social reproduction theory elucidates how inequalities are sustained, it must also account for the ways in which intersecting identities mediate differential experiences of disadvantage. The reproduction of inequality operates through multiple and overlapping aspects of exclusion that shape individuals' trajectories within economic and educational institutions.

Furthermore, apartheid-era policies systematically restricted educational opportunities for black South Africans, with a pronounced disadvantage for women. The structure of the educational system channeled women into fields traditionally regarded as "soft," such as teaching, nursing, and domestic work. These occupational patterns persist in contemporary South Africa, as women remain underrepresented in technical fields. This enduring disparity can be attributed to deeply entrenched cultural and institutional structures that have persisted despite the implementation of post-apartheid remedial policies. Additionally, although policies such as the Employment Equity Act (1998) are in place, their enforcement has been inconsistent, allowing many employers to exploit loopholes that sustain existing disparities.

The concept of path dependence further illuminates why these entrenched inequalities persist despite legal and policy reforms. Once exclusionary structures become institutionalised, they generate self-reinforcing mechanisms that sustain the status quo (Pierson, 2000). Apartheid's educational policies, for instance, ensured that black South Africans were systematically relegated to inferior schooling systems, thereby restricting their ability to develop the cultural

and educational capital necessary for upward mobility. This historical deprivation has not been meaningfully addressed in the post-apartheid era, as many black students remain concentrated in under-resourced schools that continue to produce suboptimal outcomes. The cumulative effect is the entrenchment of labour market segmentation, wherein black South Africans—especially black women—are disproportionately concentrated in unstable employment and informal economic sectors (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Social reproduction theory thus explains the intergenerational transmission of inequality, while path dependence elucidates the mechanisms that ensure its persistence. The pace of change remains slow, as dismantling path dependence necessitates both policy reforms and fundamental shifts in societal attitudes.

3.2. Education and the Perpetuation of Social Inequality

Collins (2009) describes social reproduction theory as the idea that schools do not merely provide equal opportunities but instead contribute to maintaining social inequalities. He argues that educational institutions play a role in reinforcing existing societal hierarchies through economic, cultural, and linguistic factors, which sustain disparities across generations. According to Collins, an individual's socioeconomic background significantly influences their access to quality education, which in turn perpetuates patterns of social stratification (Collins, 2009).

Furthermore, Collins (2009) notes that discussions on social reproduction were particularly influential during the 1960s but became less prominent by the 1990s due to conceptual and political changes. Despite this shift, education continues to shape labour market dynamics by distributing resources and opportunities in ways that maintain preexisting social structures (Collins, 2009).

This section aims to examine the interconnections between social reproduction and education, and to analyse how educational systems influence labour dynamics. By investigating the mechanisms through which education perpetuates existing social structures, we can better understand its role in shaping labour dynamics and sustaining class stratification. Furthermore, this section will analyse the influence of education on social class, racial dynamics, and gender relations.

3.2.1. How does education impact labour market outcomes?

Education plays a pivotal role in shaping labour relations in South Africa by influencing employment opportunities, skill development, and reinforcing social hierarchies within the workforce. According to StatsSA (2013), higher levels of education are strongly correlated with improved employment prospects. In 2013, 97.3% of graduates were employed in the formal sector, compared to 52.9% of individuals without a matric certificate. This indicates that advanced education enhances employability in the South African context. However, challenges persist, particularly among the youth. As of the first quarter of 2024, the unemployment rate for young individuals aged 15–34 stood at a staggering 45.5%, significantly higher than the national average of 32.9% (Maluleke, 2024). This disparity highlights the pressing need for targeted educational and employment interventions for younger demographics.

It has been established that education in South Africa is a critical determinant of labour market outcomes, influencing employment opportunities, skill acquisition, and social mobility. To further understand this relationship, it is important to examine how apartheid-era education policies have shaped the current norms within South Africa's education and employment systems.

3.2.2. Apartheid and the Shaping of South African Education through Social Reproduction and Path Dependence

The apartheid regime implemented a range of economic and social policies that systematically restricted African women's opportunities, particularly in education and employment. Legislation such as the Bantu (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act No. 25 and the Bantu Resettlement Act No. 19 controlled African women's mobility to urban areas, confining them to temporary residence based on white economic labour demands (The United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, 1978). This restriction was reinforced by the requirement that women obtain a guardian's permission to acquire work permits, limiting their financial independence and perpetuating their

marginalisation within both the labour market and education system. Consequently, most African women were relegated to low-paying domestic and farm labour, reinforcing entrenched gendered and racial economic disparities (The United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, 1978).

These limitations can be analysed through social reproduction theory, which argues that education systems perpetuate existing social and economic inequalities across generations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Under apartheid, the design of the education system deliberately maintained racial and gendered hierarchies by restricting African women's access to quality education, thereby limiting their economic mobility. Moreover, path dependence theory explains how historical policies create self-reinforcing mechanisms that make it difficult to break from past inequalities. The continued socioeconomic marginalisation of African women in the post-apartheid era reflects these mechanisms, where the structures of apartheid education persist in shaping labour market outcomes today.

The apartheid government further entrenched structural inequalities by maintaining severe disparities in living conditions. African women, often the primary breadwinners in rural homelands, faced extreme economic hardships due to inadequate infrastructure, lack of essential services, and poor access to education (The United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, 1978). These systemic barriers ensured that African women remained trapped in cycles of poverty, with limited avenues for socio-economic advancement. The path-dependent effects of these conditions persist today, as women from historically marginalised backgrounds continue to experience restricted access to quality education and stable employment opportunities.

Education, ideally a mechanism for upward mobility, was instead utilised as a tool to reinforce social stratification under apartheid. The disparities in educational attainment between racial groups illustrate this legacy. By 2004, white South Africans averaged 12.3 years of schooling, whereas black South Africans averaged only 7.9 years, reflecting the long-term impact of apartheid education policies (Burger & Jafta, 2006). This educational inequity continues to shape labour market outcomes; for instance, in 1995, the unemployment rate for white South Africans was 6%, compared to 38% for black South Africans (Burger & Jafta, 2006). Despite forming the majority of the workforce, black South Africans remain disproportionately represented in low-skilled occupations, earning significantly lower wages than their white counterparts.

The systematic underfunding of black education further reinforced these inequalities. Between 1930 and 1945, per capita spending on black students was consistently and significantly lower than that for white students, resulting in chronic infrastructural and resource deficiencies (Christie & Collins, 1982). Black schools were characterised by inadequate facilities, outdated instructional materials, and a severe shortage of trained teachers, while white schools received superior resources, modern equipment, and well-maintained facilities (Christie & Collins, 1982). This unequal allocation of resources exemplifies social reproduction theory, as the apartheid education system institutionalised class-based and racial inequalities that were then transmitted across generations.

The lack of infrastructure in black schools was particularly acute in rural areas. Many black students attended classes in makeshift structures or open spaces without access to basic amenities such as desks, chairs, or electricity (Kallaway, 1984). Overcrowding further hindered the quality of education. In contrast, white schools had access to well-equipped facilities, including libraries, laboratories, and sports complexes, reinforcing unequal educational trajectories (Kallaway, 1984). The effects of these disparities persist today, as many historically black schools continue to experience infrastructure deficits, demonstrating the enduring nature of path-dependent educational inequality.

The shortage of qualified teachers exacerbated these inequalities. Black educators often received inadequate training due to the limited availability of teacher training institutions, which were primarily operated by missionary organisations with minimal state support (Hartshorne, 1992). Consequently, many black teachers lacked the necessary qualifications to provide high-quality education. Meanwhile, white teachers benefited from state-funded training colleges that comprehensively prepared them for their roles (Hartshorne, 1992). This uneven distribution of educational opportunities perpetuated a workforce stratified along racial and gendered lines, aligning with social reproduction theory, which highlights how disparities in education contribute to persistent social inequalities.

Curricular design under apartheid further reinforced labour market stratification. Black students were subjected to a curriculum that emphasised basic literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills, deliberately restricting their socio-economic mobility. This form of education was designed to prepare them for low-skilled labour, ensuring their subjugation within the apartheid economic

system (Gaitskell, 1988). In contrast, white students had access to a rigorous curriculum that included advanced mathematics, sciences, and humanities, equipping them for professional careers (Gaitskell, 1988). This structured inequality in education mirrors the social reproduction theory, as the curriculum systematically funnelled black students into subordinate economic positions.

The rural-urban divide further exacerbated educational disparities. While black schools in urban centers occasionally benefited from missionary support, the majority of black students in rural areas faced severe under-resourcing. For instance, in the Eastern Cape, many students had to walk long distances to attend poorly equipped schools, discouraging regular attendance and academic engagement (Molteno, 1984). This geographical disparity highlights how apartheid-era policies created path-dependent educational disadvantages, which continue to shape socio-economic outcomes for black South Africans today.

These deeply entrenched inequalities illustrate how the apartheid education system was deliberately designed to sustain racial and gendered hierarchies. Black schooling was structured to reinforce labour demands for capitalist exploitation, ensuring that black South Africans, particularly women, remained confined to low-wage labour markets. Mission schools, which were the primary providers of black education before the formalisation of apartheid, proved inadequate in addressing these disparities due to systemic financial and structural deficiencies. The continued effects of these historical policies demonstrate both social reproduction and path dependence, as the exclusionary structures established under apartheid persist in shaping South Africa's contemporary labour market and gendered employment patterns. Section 3.2.3 examines the effects of the Bantu Education Act of 1953, a pivotal law that contributed to institutionalising these systemic inequalities.

3.2.3. The Bantu Education Act, 1953

The Bantu Education Act, as Shepherd (1955) illustrates, was specifically designed to limit black South Africans' educational potential. By transferring the control of Bantu education to the Native Affairs Department, apartheid authorities ensured that black South Africans were prepared for a limited, predefined role in society—largely as labourers. Dr. H.F. Verwoerd, the

Minister of Native Affairs who introduced the Act, justified this move by asserting that black education had "failed" under previous oversight, a claim many saw as a pretext for enforcing racial and social stratification (Shepherd, 1955).

The enactment of the Bantu Education Act of 1953 institutionalised these inequities by extending state control over black schooling. The Act mandated that all black schools register with the government, granting the Minister of Education unchecked authority to regulate or shut down institutions misaligned with state agendas (Christie & Collins, 1982). Through standardised administrative frameworks, the legislation formalised an education system explicitly designed to channel black South Africans into low-skilled labour roles, while systematically excluding them from universities designated for white South Africans.

This pattern was further reinforced by subsequent policies, such as the Extension of University Education Act of 1959, which mandated the segregation of tertiary institutions and restricted black students to designated, inferior colleges. These measures allowed the apartheid regime to exercise comprehensive control over black education, dictating its content and access. This consolidation of control entrenched systemic economic and social barriers, ensuring the persistence of racial and class inequality through education (Christie & Collins, 1982).

The legacy of these apartheid-era policies remains evident in South Africa's educational and economic structures. By design, apartheid education did not merely reflect prevailing racist ideologies but actively served as a strategic instrument to entrench economic hierarchies. The deliberate suppression of educational opportunities for black South Africans ensured their confinement to low-wage labour markets, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of racial and class oppression that continues to impede socio-economic mobility for black populations today.

The historical development of education in South Africa, particularly for black individuals and women, underscores profound inequalities entrenched through colonial and apartheid-era policies. The establishment of the first school for black South Africans in 1799 marked the onset of a system predominantly shaped by missionary education, which remained the primary mode of schooling for black students until 1948 (Molteno, 1984). This missionary-driven approach was subsequently supplanted by state-controlled Bantu Education under the Nationalist Party, which restructured educational oversight to align with the socio-economic objectives of an industrialising economy.

According to Molteno (1984), the Bantu Education system was explicitly designed to prepare black South Africans for low-skilled labour, thereby constraining their opportunities for social mobility while reinforcing the privileges of white labour. This educational framework entrenched racial hierarchies, ensuring that black South Africans remained economically and socially subordinate within the broader apartheid system. Through this strategic redirection of educational policy, Bantu Education functioned as a key instrument in perpetuating systemic inequality.

This separation from the provincial councils, responsible for educating all other races, was met with significant opposition from the African community. Many black South Africans argued that all children, regardless of race, deserved access to the highest possible quality of education (Shepherd, 1955). Their discontent reflected a broader aspiration for equity and an end to the relegation of African children to an inferior educational status that would predetermine their roles in society (Shepherd, 1955).

Today, the echoes of apartheid's educational policies continue to resonate, as disparities in schooling outcomes and labour market participation continue. While South Africa has made strides toward deracialisation, the intersection of education and employment remains a critical area for addressing the long-standing inequalities that still shape the lives of black South Africans. The legacy of apartheid in the educational system remains a barrier to achieving social and economic equity, necessitating targeted reforms that not only increase access to quality education but also dismantle the economic structures that apartheid constructed.

The persistence of these inequalities is particularly evident when examining race and gender disparities in educational enrolment. Despite policy efforts aimed at promoting equal access to education, historical patterns continue to influence the opportunities available to women and men. The structural barriers imposed by apartheid's educational policies have had lasting effects on gendered schooling trajectories, shaping the skills and qualifications that individuals bring to the labour market. Understanding these disparities is essential to addressing the broader issue of gendered employment patterns and the ways in which education either reinforces or disrupts existing inequalities.

3.2.4. Disparities in Gender Educational Enrolment

The intersection of race and gender within the education system has long shaped access to learning opportunities in South Africa, with apartheid-era policies exacerbating disparities in enrolment and attainment. While South Africa achieved gender parity in primary school enrolments earlier than many African nations, with equal representation of girls and boys in primary education as early as 1955, progress for black girls, in particular, remained hindered by systemic barriers. By 1985, fewer than 5% of black adult women had completed secondary school, and compulsory schooling was not accessible to African girls until after apartheid ended in 1994 (Martineau, 1984). Thus, despite an increase in school attendance between 1960 and 1985, access to meaningful educational advancement for black women remained limited.

Educational pathways for South African students have also been stratified along gender lines. South African schools historically channelled boys and girls into different fields; boys received training in trades, while girls were directed toward domestic tasks, limiting career options and reinforcing traditional gender roles (Martineau, 1984). In mission schools, female students were discouraged, and often barred, from academic or technical subjects, which Gaitskell (1988) describes as "vocational, domestic, and subservient" education. This type of schooling aimed to prepare African women solely for domestic roles, promoting skills like sewing and laundry work and perpetuating their subordination within the social hierarchy.

Data on literacy rates underscore the slow progress for black women, who saw only a 9.3% decline in illiteracy between 1960 and 1985, a profound contrast to the literacy gains achieved by coloured, Indian, and white women (Martineau, 1984). The educational inequities are similarly reflected in university enrollment figures from 1991, which reveal a striking disparity: out of every thousand people, there were 51 white, 35 Indian, 13 coloured, and only 9 African students in South African universities (NCHE, 1996). This discrepancy reflects deeply rooted structural inequalities that have hindered equitable access to higher education.

While girls from all races comprised around half of senior secondary school enrollments by the mid-1970s, only a small fraction transitioned to university studies. Even as female enrollment in higher education increased, women continued to experience restricted access both numerically and proportionally (Martineau, 1984). This exclusion extends to the labour market, where male dominance in lucrative fields such as engineering, science, and technology persists. The labour

data indicate that without interventions targeting nontraditional fields, women, especially black women, remain concentrated in the humanities and arts, which may limit their influence within societal power structures and restrict their roles in policymaking (Fennema, 1984; Swainson, 1993).

Thus, the data suggests a need for targeted policies that not only increase access for African women to higher education but also promote entry into technical and economically rewarding disciplines. Simply enhancing educational access has not proven sufficient to shift women's standing in the workforce or society. Instead, comprehensive redress efforts are essential for dismantling the deep-seated barriers that have historically excluded black women from achieving equitable participation in both educational and economic spheres.

While addressing educational access is a crucial step toward gender and racial equity, it is only part of the solution. The persistence of labour market segmentation highlights how deeply entrenched structural barriers continue to limit African women's economic mobility. Despite advancements in education, black women remain disproportionately concentrated in low-wage employment due to the enduring effects of historical exclusion. Section 3.3 explores how education and social reproduction shape labour market segmentation, reinforcing patterns of inequality that persist in post-apartheid South Africa.

3.3. Labour Market Segmentation: The Influence of Education and Social Reproduction

As defined earlier, social reproduction refers to the ways in which social structures, institutions, and cultural norms perpetuate inequalities across generations. In the context of education, this means that schools often reproduce class, race, and gender disparities, which then translate into labour market segmentation.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that the amount and type of capital a person inherits from birth play a crucial role in shaping their ability to acquire cultural capital, which subsequently determines their position within the social hierarchy. This perspective highlights how education systems

contribute to maintaining social inequalities by favouring the cultural capital already held by privileged groups, ultimately reinforcing and legitimising existing social structures.

In South Africa, apartheid-era education policies, such as the Bantu Education Act (1953), deliberately underfunded black education, creating a long-term skills gap. This legacy persists, as many historically black schools still struggle with inadequate infrastructure and resources, limiting access to higher education and skilled employment (Spaull, 2013). These structural disparities reinforce broader patterns of social reproduction, where class, race, and gender intersect to influence labour market outcomes. This section examines how these historical and structural factors continue to shape contemporary labour market dynamics in South Africa.

3.3.1. Gender and Work in South Africa: Patterns of Inequality and Progress

Global analyses on long-term labour trends indicate a significant increase in women's labour force participation relative to men's, particularly since the 1980s, which has raised the overall share of female employment. However, men continue to be more likely to participate in the labour force across most countries (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020).

In the South African context, the post-apartheid era marked a significant increase in women's labour force participation. Between 1994 and 2019, female labour force participation rose from approximately 40% to 54%, compared to a modest increase in male participation from 60% to 67%. This increase aligns with a global pattern, as women's share of the South African labour force expanded from 42% to 46% during this period. A notable aspect of this growth is the substantial increase in African women's participation, which climbed from 36% to 53%, whereas white women's participation saw a smaller increase, from 55% to 59% (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020).

Despite increased female labour force participation, the quality of employment outcomes remains a challenge. Much of the employment gained by women has been concentrated in low-skilled, informal sectors, characterised by low wages and job insecurity. In South Africa, post-apartheid gains in women's workforce participation reveal critical limitations within the labour market structure, highlighting persistent barriers to economic equality. By 2019, women faced a broad unemployment rate of 40%, substantially higher than the 33% observed among men,

demonstrating that participation gains do not necessarily translate to improved employment quality for women. African women face even greater disparity, with a broad unemployment rate of 45%, contrasting with the 11% unemployment rate for white women. These inequities point to structural obstacles—such as insufficient childcare access, the significant distance of many from job centers, and financial constraints on job-seeking—which disproportionately hinder women's, particularly African women's, economic access. These factors reflect entrenched inequalities that continue to shape access to economic opportunities in South Africa (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020). These disparities underscore social reproduction theory, wherein economic structures and social norms reinforce existing inequalities, limiting the intergenerational mobility of African women.

While approximately 5.7 million women entered the South African labour force between 1994 and 2019, only a limited proportion of this increase resulted in stable or meaningful employment, with most women filling wage-based roles and very few achieving higher-income work or secure self-employment (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020). As the authors state, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor reports that women are generally less inclined than men to engage in early-stage entrepreneurship, and when they do participate, it is frequently driven by economic necessity rather than opportunity. This pattern indicates the ongoing presence of structural gender barriers, which restrict women to the most precarious sectors of the workforce and limit their autonomy in economic decision-making. Path dependence is evident here, as women's limited economic agency today is shaped by historical exclusion from business ownership and skilled employment opportunities.

Race continues to exacerbate gender-based disparities within the labour market. African women remain heavily represented in the lowest-paid positions; by 2019, 16% of employed African women were in domestic work and 26% in other low-skill occupations, a sharp contrast to the minimal representation of white women in these roles. Conversely, 17% of white women occupied professional positions, and 23% held top management roles, while only 5% and 4% of African women, respectively, were represented in these higher-skilled sectors. This stark discrepancy illustrates that, although women overall have seen some progress since 1994, African women still face considerable obstacles, revealing the persistence of racial and gender-based job segregation (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020). These occupational patterns are

reinforced through social reproduction mechanisms, where historical inequalities in access to education and capital continue to shape employment outcomes across generations.

Thus, the rise in women's labour force participation masks the reality that true economic empowerment remains out of reach for many. Without targeted interventions to dismantle systemic inequalities, particularly those impacting African women, South Africa's labour market will continue to perpetuate historical patterns of exclusion rather than achieving genuine progress toward equity (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020).

Furthermore, regarding earnings in South Africa, gender disparities in income and opportunities remain deeply entrenched, with women generally earning less than men. Although the gender pay gap has narrowed slightly over time, it continues to present a major challenge. Between 1994 and 2017, women's earnings increased relative to men's; however, these gains are concentrated primarily among those at the lowest and highest ends of the income spectrum. The median wage gap—reflecting the typical worker's earnings—has seen little change, indicating that improvements in income equality for women are uneven and inconsistent across the workforce (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020).

The apartheid regime in South Africa reinforced a lasting legacy of pronounced workplace discrimination, entrenching gender and racial inequalities that continue to shape the labour market (Musetsho, Isac, & Dobrin, 2021). Today, gender-based disparities remain central to the South African labour landscape, manifesting through substantial income distribution imbalances that intersect both gender and race. A small proportion of workers earn the highest incomes, with men disproportionately represented within this high-earning segment.

While minimum wage legislation and employment equity policies have supported wage growth for women in both lower- and higher-skilled jobs, considerable earnings barriers remain. Studies indicate that a portion of the gender wage gap is "unexplained," meaning that differences in factors such as job type, education, and experience do not fully account for it. This unexplained gap likely points to pay discrimination, with women potentially being paid less than men even in comparable roles (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020). This persistent wage inequality demonstrates the self-reinforcing nature of social reproduction, where structural discrimination continues to shape economic outcomes despite formal policy efforts.

In addition, women's participation in the South African labour force has risen over recent decades; however, they continue to shoulder the majority of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020). While South African women have made notable progress in entering the paid workforce, this advancement is tempered by the persistent burden of unpaid domestic labour, which constrains their economic mobility and potential for career progression. The household division of labour remains heavily gendered, with women predominantly responsible for childcare and household upkeep. This imbalance highlights an ongoing need for policies that promote more equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities and better recognise men's roles in caregiving (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020).

Having established the broader patterns of gender inequality and progress in South Africa's labour market, we now turn to a more specific examination of occupational segregation and the gender pay gap within the formal sector. Despite increased female labour force participation, women remain concentrated in lower-paying occupations and industries, reinforcing persistent wage disparities. Section 3.3.2 explores these patterns in detail, analysing the structural and institutional factors that sustain gendered divisions in employment and income.

3.3.2. Patterns of occupational segregation and the dynamics of the gender pay gap within South Africa's formal sector

Adeleken and Bussin (2022) examined the impact of women's increased participation in formal employment on occupational gender segregation and the gender pay gap across multiple sectors and industries. The study aimed to evaluate the progress made to date and to inform more effective, targeted interventions that address the gender pay gap with measurable outcomes.

The study's assessment of occupational distribution revealed that certain fields remain fully gender-segregated, while others have achieved varying degrees of gender integration. Occupations with 75% or more women are categorised as female-dominated, and those with less than 25% women as male-dominated; both are considered segregated. Occupations with a gender distribution between 25% and 75% are classified as integrated (Adeleken & Bussin, 2022).

The study found that specific fields—Secretarial, Technical and Specialist, and Operational—remain highly gender-segregated. The Secretarial field is still predominantly female (91.0%),

while Technical and Specialist (77.7%) and Operational roles (77.1%) are largely male. Traditional female occupations, including Secretarial, Financial and Accounting, and the human resources (HR) sector such as recruiting companies, agents, and HR departments in corporate fields, are concentrated in fields such as education, caregiving, clerical work, and cashiering. In contrast, traditional male fields include Marketing and Sales, Compliance and Risk, Executive Management, Information Technology, Logistics and Procurement, Operational, and Technical and Specialist roles (Adeleken & Bussin, 2022). Over time, shifts in gender representation, with women entering higher-paying, traditionally male-dominated fields, have led to trends of integration, tipping, and re-segregation across different occupations.

The study's findings indicate that women now represent 37.5% in Compliance and Risk, 36.6% in Executive Management, 34.4% in Information Technology, and 26.7% in Logistics and Procurement. Conversely, men make up 31.8% in Finance and Accounting, 38.8% in human resources, and 46.2% in Marketing and Sales within traditionally female-dominated fields. Marketing and Sales is approaching full integration, with men comprising 49% of its workforce, which closely mirrors the general labour force gender composition (Weeden, Newhart, & Gelbgiser, 2018).

While occupations such as Compliance and Risk, Executive Management, Finance and Accounting, Human Capital, Information Technology, and Logistics and Procurement show signs of increasing integration, significant progress remains necessary to achieve complete gender parity in these fields (Adeleken & Bussin, 2022).

Adeleken and Bussin (2022) further argue that in the highest-paying occupational categories, men not only constitute the majority but also enjoy higher median incomes. This pattern holds consistently across nearly all industries examined, regardless of the specific percentile levels within the income distribution. Notably, even within human resources, an industry where women predominate, men continue to earn more than their female counterparts (Adeleken & Bussin, 2022).

According to Adeleken and Bussin (2022), the gender pay gap in male-dominated occupations has either narrowed—ranging from 2.9% to 13.9%—or shifted to favour women. Despite this narrowing, fields such as Information Technology, Executive Management, and Compliance and Risk remain predominantly male, both in workforce composition and in income levels. However,

in Compliance and Risk, the pay gap has approached statistical insignificance, suggesting a trend toward equal pay for work of comparable value. Conversely, in areas such as Technical and Specialist roles, Logistics and Procurement, and Operational positions, the pay gap has widened in favour of women (Adeleken & Bussin, 2022). This does not necessarily mean that women are being paid more than men, but the gender wage gap is significantly narrowing. This shows an improvement in these particular sectors.

The authors further posit that the increasing wage advantages observed for women in certain industries may be attributed to the rising number of highly qualified and skilled women attaining senior-level roles in traditionally male-dominated sectors. This phenomenon aligns with the theory of social reproduction, which contends that institutional structures and societal norms systematically shape labour market trajectories, thereby influencing women's career advancement. The growing presence of women in high-paying occupations, reinforced by their advanced educational credentials, may serve as a catalyst for further gender diversification within these industries. Conversely, in female-dominated occupations, the gender pay gap tends to favour men, likely due to their greater access to promotion and career advancement opportunities. This pattern reflects the theory of path dependence, as historical and systemic factors—such as entrenched gender norms and unequal access to education and resources—continue to shape contemporary labour market dynamics. While women have made significant inroads into male-dominated occupations, the gender pay gap persists across industries, varying by sector and seniority level (Adeleken & Bussin, 2022).

The persistence of gender-based occupational segregation reflects the principles of social reproduction theory, which suggests that labour market structures reinforce existing societal norms and inequalities. Furthermore, the gender wage disparity favouring men is less pronounced in male-dominated occupations compared to female-dominated ones, where men often receive a wage premium. Interestingly, certain male-dominated fields display a statistically significant wage advantage for women, indicating progress toward gender integration. However, full gender parity remains elusive, as historical labour market patterns—consistent with the theory of path dependence—continue to shape occupational outcomes. Addressing these disparities requires ongoing efforts to break entrenched cycles of gendered employment and promote equitable access to all occupational categories.

Building on this analysis, the following section explores the broader significance of these findings, assessing their implications for labour policies, economic development, and gender equity. By situating the results within existing theoretical frameworks and empirical research, this discussion provides insights into the structural and policy-driven interventions necessary to foster greater gender inclusivity and equitable labour market outcomes.

4. Discussion, Findings, and Implications

4.1. Introduction to the Discussion

This study examines the manner in which the South African education system contributes to the path dependence of gendered employment patterns. It builds on the theoretical framework of social reproduction, which suggests that societal structures, particularly education, serve to perpetuate existing inequalities, ensuring that economic and social advantages (or disadvantages) are transmitted across generations (Bourdieu, 1986). In the South African context, historical inequalities rooted in apartheid-era education policies continue to shape labour market outcomes, reinforcing occupational segregation along gendered and racial lines.

The persistence of these disparities suggests a strong path-dependent trajectory, where past institutional arrangements continue to influence present economic and social structures. Despite policy interventions aimed at redressing apartheid's legacy, the education system remains deeply unequal, affecting skill acquisition, employment opportunities, and social mobility. Understanding this link is essential in addressing gendered employment patterns and proposing policies that can break cycles of disadvantage rather than reinforcing them.

4.2. Discussion of Key Findings

The findings of this study underscore the enduring impact of historical structural inequalities on South Africa's education system and labour market, reinforcing patterns of social reproduction as

theorised by Bourdieu (1986). Education, a critical mechanism for capital accumulation, has historically functioned as an instrument of exclusion, systematically limiting access to economic mobility based on race, gender, and class. Despite extensive post-apartheid policy interventions aimed at redressing these disparities, the education system continues to reflect entrenched structural asymmetries that manifest in the labour market. These findings demonstrate that educational inequalities are not merely residual effects of apartheid-era policies but are continuously reproduced through institutional mechanisms, thereby perpetuating labour market segmentation and constraining access to high-status employment for historically marginalised groups. This section analyses how these structural dynamics continue to shape educational and labour market inequalities, beginning with an analysis of education and social reproduction, followed by an examination of labour market segmentation and the role of path dependence in sustaining structural constraints.

4.2.1. Education and Social Reproduction

As Bourdieu (1986) asserts, social life is not an aggregation of isolated individuals but a systematically structured field shaped by the distribution and accumulation of various forms of capital. These forms—economic, cultural, and social—are dynamic, subject to exchange and transformation, and accumulate over time in ways that determine individuals' social positions and access to opportunities. Within this framework, the role of education is pivotal in shaping labour market outcomes, particularly in historically stratified societies such as South Africa.

The apartheid-era education system was a deliberate mechanism of social exclusion, systematically disadvantaging black South Africans by restricting access to quality education and skills training. The state's investment in education was deeply unequal, ensuring that black children received inferior schooling, which limited their skill development and curtailed their future employment prospects. This institutionalised inequality created a self-perpetuating cycle of exclusion, where limited access to higher education further restricted economic mobility for black individuals. The long-term consequence of these disparities is the entrenchment of structural inequalities across generations, disproportionately affecting black South Africans, particularly women, in the contemporary labour market.

Despite post-apartheid reforms aimed at redressing these injustices, disparities in educational access and quality persist, particularly in historically marginalised communities. Black South Africans, especially women, continue to face systemic barriers to acquiring the skills necessary for entry into high-paying, high-status professions. Consequently, they remain disproportionately concentrated in low-skilled, low-wage sectors, reinforcing cycles of social reproduction that perpetuate economic stratification (Spaull, 2013). This pattern is not incidental but a direct consequence of historical and institutional factors that continue to shape labour market dynamics.

South Africa's education system remains deeply shaped by apartheid-era structures that prioritised the needs of a racially segregated, capital-intensive economy (Spaull, 2013). These systems were designed to produce a cheap and compliant black labour force for mining and industry while excluding black women from technical and formal employment pathways. Even in the post-apartheid era, many schools in historically disadvantaged areas lack the resources to equip learners, especially black girls, with the technical skills demanded by high-growth sectors. Social norms and unequal access to quality education continue to direct black women toward undervalued and low-paying career paths. This entrenches a cycle where education reinforces, rather than disrupts, gendered and racialised employment outcomes.

The persistence of gendered employment disparities is evident in South Africa's current labour market statistics. Maluleke (2024), in the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) Q2:2024, reports that the national unemployment rate rose to 33.5% in the second quarter of 2024. The situation is even more severe for women, with an unemployment rate of 35.8%, underscoring the gendered nature of labour market exclusion. These figures illustrate how historical inequalities, compounded by ongoing systemic barriers, continue to limit women's economic opportunities despite increased educational attainment. Even among women with tertiary qualifications, entrenched occupational segregation, discriminatory hiring practices, and restricted access to professional networks hinder their mobility into high-income professions (Maluleke, 2024).

This reality aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, which posits that access to valued cultural and social resources determines one's ability to navigate and succeed in economic structures. Women and historically marginalised racial groups struggle to accumulate the same cultural and social capital as their more privileged counterparts, further entrenching labour

market inequalities. The education system, rather than serving as a tool for social mobility, continues to reinforce existing hierarchies, ensuring that those with historically disadvantaged backgrounds remain excluded from economic opportunities.

The intersection of race, gender, and class in South Africa's labour market reveals the enduring effects of historical inequities. Limited access to quality education constrains skill acquisition, reinforcing occupational stratification that restricts entry into high-status employment. Even for those who overcome these barriers and obtain tertiary qualifications, the labour market remains structurally exclusionary, favouring those with pre-existing advantages. The persistence of these disparities demands urgent policy interventions to dismantle entrenched cycles of social reproduction and promote equitable access to education and employment.

Section 4.2.2 examines how these structural constraints manifest in labour market outcomes, illustrating how historical inequities continue to be perpetuated through occupational segregation and restricted access to high-status employment.

4.2.2. Labour Market Segmentation

The findings of this study demonstrate that labour market segmentation is deeply intertwined with patterns of social reproduction. Racialised and gendered employment persists, where black South Africans, especially women, remain concentrated in low-skill, low-wage jobs. This pattern is a direct result of how education has been structured historically and continues to be shaped by systemic barriers. For instance, black women often face a double disadvantage—being both racial and gender minorities in an already unequal labour market.

Statistics from StatsSA, compiled by Maluleke (2024) show that while higher education significantly reduces unemployment rates across the population, black women with tertiary qualifications still experience disproportionately high unemployment rates compared to their male counterparts or white women. This highlights how structural inequalities in the education system create long-lasting barriers in access to high-status employment.

The persistence of labour market segmentation underscores the long-term effects of historical inequalities, where racialised and gendered employment patterns remain deeply entrenched

despite policy interventions. The disproportionate representation of black South Africans—particularly women—in low-wage, precarious employment reflects not only present-day structural barriers but also the enduring legacy of apartheid-era policies that restricted access to education and skilled professions. These patterns are not incidental; rather, they are reinforced through mechanisms of path dependence, where historical institutional arrangements continue to shape contemporary economic opportunities. The following section explores how these structural constraints perpetuate cycles of exclusion, limiting the extent to which post-apartheid reforms can fully redress inequalities in education and the labour market.

4.2.3. Path Dependence and Structural Constraints

The path dependency observed in this study is evident in the continued influence of apartheid-era educational policies on present-day labour market outcomes. Educational policies that segregated resources, limited access to quality schooling, and enforced a racialised curriculum have had long-term consequences for the skills and knowledge acquired by different demographic groups. Although the post-apartheid government has implemented several policies to address these inequalities, the legacy of apartheid continues to shape access to quality education and employment opportunities.

This legacy persists through curriculum bias, underinvestment in historically black schools, and social expectations that divert black women into undervalued, low-paying work, despite formal educational gains (Nattrass & Seekings, 2001). Historically, black women were excluded from industrial labour and relegated to informal or care-based roles, which influenced how they were educated and what opportunities were made available to them. Today, this legacy persists through curriculum choices, underinvestment in schools serving black communities, and social expectations that channel girls into less technical, lower-paid fields (Spaull, 2013). As a result, black women remain underrepresented in high-skill, high-wage sectors, despite formal gains in access to education.

For instance, many historically disadvantaged schools still face significant challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, and limited access to technology. These issues affect students' ability to succeed academically, thereby limiting their access to high-status jobs after

graduation. This creates a locked-in system where the educational inequalities of the past continue to shape the opportunities of the present, contributing to a rigid labour market structure that maintains gendered and racialised job segregation.

The findings of this study reflect the central tenets of Social Reproduction Theory, which explains how inequalities are perpetuated across generations through both visible and invisible institutional mechanisms. In the South African context, the education system continues to reflect and reproduce the racialised and gendered hierarchies established during apartheid. Black women are often burdened with unpaid care work while receiving inadequate schooling, which limits their access to high-status jobs and reinforces intergenerational cycles of poverty. These outcomes are not coincidental but the result of structural reproduction, where institutions such as schools, the labour market, and the household interact to sustain unequal social relations. By applying SRT to this analysis, it becomes clear that the persistent disadvantages facing black women are deeply embedded in how both labour and life are socially organised in post-apartheid South Africa.

4.3. Rethinking Policy: Addressing Structural Barriers in Education and Employment in South Africa

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for policy interventions aimed at addressing both educational inequalities and labour market segmentation. One key recommendation is to target resources to historically disadvantaged communities to ensure that quality education is accessible to all students, regardless of their background. This includes improving school infrastructure, investing in teacher training, and providing additional support for underperforming students.

Additionally, gender-sensitive policies should be implemented to ensure that women, particularly black women, have equal access to high-paying and high-status professions. Affirmative action policies, mentorship programs, and initiatives that encourage women's participation in traditionally male-dominated sectors (such as STEM fields) could play a critical role in reducing gender disparities in employment outcomes.

Despite post-apartheid policies, such as the Constitution of South Africa (1996); the South African Schools Act (1996); and the National Education Policy Act (1996), aimed at redressing historical inequalities, significant challenges persist in South Africa's education and labour markets. The legacy of apartheid-era educational policies continues to hinder the realisation of equitable opportunities for all South Africans, particularly for black South Africans, women, and those from historically disadvantaged communities.

Post-apartheid educational reforms have focused on improving access to education and bridging the racial divide in schools, but disparities in the quality of education remain stark. Schools in predominantly black and rural areas often struggle with poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and a shortage of qualified teachers, all of which hinder students' ability to acquire the necessary skills for high-paying jobs. These inequalities are compounded by the fact that students from wealthier backgrounds often have access to better resources, private tutoring, and extracurricular opportunities, enabling them to accumulate greater cultural capital and secure higher-status professions.

For instance, while policies such as the National Development Plan (NDP) aim to improve access to education and reduce inequality, they have not sufficiently addressed the unequal distribution of educational resources across different regions and socio-economic classes. Maluleke (2024) reports that, despite an increase in enrolment rates, students from historically disadvantaged areas continue to underperform, contributing to persistent disparities in access to the labour market (Maluleke, 2024).

Moreover, while affirmative action policies have been implemented to improve black South Africans' access to employment, gendered employment disparities remain a critical issue. Despite the Employment Equity Act and other policies aimed at increasing the representation of women, particularly black women, in high-paying professions, gender-based discrimination in hiring and promotion processes persists. Women, especially black women, remain disproportionately represented in lower-wage and service-oriented jobs, even when they possess the same qualifications as their male counterparts. Stats SA data has shown that women face higher unemployment rates than men, and those who are employed are more likely to work in lower-paying sectors.

In the post-apartheid era, South Africa's embrace of neoliberal economic policies has disproportionately marginalised black women, exacerbating structural inequalities. This is particularly evident in the persistence of unpaid care responsibilities and restricted access to stable and secure employment opportunities (Casale, Posel, & Mosomi, 2020). Neoliberal reforms have deepened gendered disparities by transferring the responsibility for social reproduction from the state to individual households, without ensuring adequate public support mechanisms. Addressing these entrenched inequities necessitates the implementation of gender-responsive social protection frameworks. Policy interventions such as subsidised childcare and targeted active labour market programmes, including skills development and wage subsidies specifically aimed at black women, are critical for enhancing equitable access to employment.

In South Africa, addressing ingrained racism that undermines black women's skills requires more than anti-discrimination policies. It demands structural change in how talent is recognised and rewarded. This includes reforming recruitment and promotion practices to value diverse educational and work experiences, implementing mentorship and sponsorship programmes targeting black women, and ensuring greater transparency in pay and career progression. Additionally, government and private sector initiatives should invest in leadership pipelines and technical training that challenge racialised assumptions about competence. Without actively reshaping institutional cultures and accountability systems, black women will continue to face invisible barriers despite having the qualifications.

Furthermore, to address the impact of ingrained racism on black women’s perceived skills, South Africa’s education system must promote equity at all levels. This includes reforming the curriculum to reflect inclusive histories, training teachers to challenge bias, and providing targeted career guidance that encourages black girls to pursue high-skill fields. Increased investment in historically under-resourced schools, access to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) resources, and mentorship programmes linking students with black women professionals can help shift perceptions of capability. Additionally, bursaries and structured support for black women in tertiary education and high-demand industries are essential to bridge the gap between education and meaningful employment.

Furthermore, affirmative action and gender-sensitive policies have not been fully effective in overcoming the structural barriers that still exist in the labour market. Women, especially those

from disadvantaged communities, often encounter a “glass ceiling” that limits their career advancement, despite holding university degrees or having technical qualifications. The persistent gender pay gap reflects the systemic barriers women face, even as they continue to gain qualifications and experience.

In light of these findings, targeted interventions remain crucial. While post-apartheid policies have made significant strides in expanding access to education, there remains an urgent need for more comprehensive, targeted policies that address the structural inequalities within the education system and the labour market. Investments in teacher training, school infrastructure, and bridging programs for disadvantaged students are essential to ensure that the educational system functions as an equalising force. At the same time, affirmative action policies should be extended to include mentorship programs and incentivise women’s participation in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

By targeting both educational inequalities and labour market segmentation with holistic and gender-sensitive policies, South Africa can hope to create a more equitable future for all of its citizens.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how the South African education system contributes to the path dependence of gendered employment patterns. The findings reveal that apartheid-era educational policies created structural inequalities that continue to influence gendered labour market outcomes. Specifically, the legacy of unequal access to quality education and the gendered division of academic disciplines has resulted in significant disparities, particularly in high-paying sectors like STEM and managerial roles.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by bringing a unique corpus of data and analysis that specifically focuses on the intersection of historical educational policies and contemporary gendered employment patterns in South Africa. Unlike previous studies that may have broadly examined gender disparities or the impacts of apartheid policies, this work provides

a focused examination of how educational structures reinforce these disparities over time. By incorporating historical data, policy analysis, and insights into current employment trends, this study offers a comprehensive and nuanced perspective that deepens our understanding of path dependence in a gendered context.

These findings highlight the critical need for targeted educational reforms that address these systemic barriers. Efforts such as revising curricula to challenge gender stereotypes, implementing mentorship programs, and providing financial incentives for underrepresented groups can help break the cycle of inequality. Policymakers must recognise the enduring impact of historical policies and take deliberate action to foster a more inclusive education system and labour market.

While this research provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The study relies on secondary data, which may not fully capture individual experiences of education and employment pathways. Future research could benefit from qualitative methods, such as interviews or case studies, to better understand the lived realities of individuals navigating these systems. Additionally, future researchers could analyse the effectiveness of post-apartheid educational reforms. This would involve evaluating whether these reforms have reduced the educational disparities between different racial groups and genders and improved labour market outcomes. Lastly, another aspect to be explored could be the evaluation of equity policies within the labour market.

In conclusion, addressing the historical roots of gendered employment patterns through education reform is essential for building a more equitable society. By breaking the cycle of path dependence, South Africa can unlock the potential of its entire population, paving the way for a more inclusive and prosperous future.

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