

Resilience and sustainability in African higher education: A post-Covid, collaborative autoethnographic reflection

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The trends in higher education's post-pandemic recovery and towards sustainability are not new concepts and are still being discussed in various contexts. Evidence shows that higher education suffered greatly from the pandemic due to closures of institutions. Hence, more post-pandemic studies are necessary to understand its effects and how sustainability can be a reference framework towards the path for future resilience. Our research uses collaborative autoethnography complemented with content analysis as a methodological approach to explore resilience and sustainability in African higher education in two countries, Tanzania and South Africa. Specifically, we explore female academic's resilience and sustainability in higher education institutions by contrasting two African countries that approached the pandemic very differently. Tanzania did not have a lockdown, while South Africa had a lockdown which was imposed for at least a year. Our post-Covid reflection using a collaborative autoethnographic approach provides unique insights into resilience and sustainability in higher education, in both countries and in the broader African context.

Introduction

Sustainability seeks to enable better futures for next generations through pillars that are socially, environmentally and economically viable. However, the Covid-19 global pandemic disrupted systems including higher education, as evident from numerous studies such as Abera (2021) and Atuhurra et al. (2023). Additionally, Ganguly et al. (2020) observed the differentiation of economic activities in both the workplaces and homes of female academics that emerged due to the mandating of "working-from-home" as one of the measures to combat the pandemic. Thereby, females contributed significantly to social changes arising from the pandemic (Ganguly et al., 2020).

Apart from female contributions to social change, Bordoloi et al. (2023) reflected on issues of technology challenges for female academics during the pandemic in countries like India, the Philippines and Tanzania and urged for more research to understand their resilience, especially during a crisis. For the purposes of our paper, "resilience" is referred to as women academics' ability to adapt to significant change like the Covid-19 pandemic (Bordoloi et al., 2023). Subsequently, the African Union through a 10-year *Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa* (STISA) advocated for building universities as centres of excellence with a capacity to include women as drivers of its development agenda (STISA, 2024). It is from this backdrop that our study gains momentum as we seek to explore resilience and sustainability in African higher education, especially with regards to female academics. Our study employs sustainability as a framework towards the path for resilience in a post-Covid world, using a collaborative autoethnographical

approach in two countries of Africa, namely Tanzania and South Africa. Collaborative research is key in improving knowledge production (Mkwizu, 2024) and is also an approach for self-reflection, as indicated by Roy and Uekusa (2020).

In the light of a post-pandemic recovery, our paper considers the challenges encountered by two female academics during the pandemic, and their post-Covid reflections. Therefore, we posed five questions:

- (i) What were the challenges we faced during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- (ii) What coping strategies did we employ to manage our personal and professional lives?
- (iii) What are our perspectives regarding sustainability in higher education?
- (iv) What recommendations can we offer on resilience in higher education?
- (v) What are our post-Covid reflections on resilience and sustainability?

Our findings on resilience and sustainability can shed light on how post-Covid recovery interventions can help towards more sustainable higher education institutions.

Literature review

Sustainability

The definition of sustainability as a concept varies in current literature. From an entrepreneurship education perspective, Kidere and Mkwizu (2023) defined sustainability entrepreneurship education as programs which can be used to sustain the changing time and spaces within education due to disruptions like climate and technological change, including unexpected disruptions like Covid-19. The United Nations (UN) Brundtland Commission, on the other hand, referred to sustainability as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UN, 2023). In our study, the term sustainability is the practice of learning from pandemic-induced experiences using Bordoloi et al.'s (2023) deconstructing resilience theory.

Theoretical frame

In theorising resilience, Bordoloi et al. (2023) defined resilience as women academics' ability to adapt to change induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the assumption is that resiliency hinges on coping strategies of female academics in higher education (Bordoloi et al., 2023). Other scholars like Bissessar et al. (2023) commented that resilience can be identified in many ways and more importantly on how people can experience, enhance and re-define resilience in terms of contextual and situational perspectives. In the application of deconstructing resiliency theory, our paper argues that sustainability is crucial in exploring resilience as a sustainability requisite using the post-pandemic reflections of two female academics.

Resilience and sustainability

Higher education is experiencing a post-Covid recovery with a significant transition from face-to-face education to online distance education (Abu Talib et al., 2021). The digital divide in developing countries requires educational practices that direct development towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) as a mechanism to achieve Vision 2063 of the African Union (Uleanya & Yassim, 2023). In a systematic literature review Abu Talib et al. (2021) cautioned the need to give attention to issues that arose due to the pandemic, such as poor communication, technical difficulties, the need for technology literacy and the balance between professional and personal life. Others have drawn attention to the “North-South research gap” in publishing that impacts negatively upon academics’ resilience and sustainability (Groenewald & Teise, 2024).

Exploring similar sentiments, the study by Bordoloi et al. (2023) reviewed female academic experiences in India, the Philippines and Tanzania, revealing they had support from friends and family as a coping strategy during the pandemic. In support of Bordoloi et al. (2023) who called for more studies that explore female academic perspectives, our study expands current literature by including South Africa. This supports Mkwizu’s (2022) assertion that we need more development of African theories through contextualised research and indigenous perspectives. Studies such as Rivera (2022) conducted in the Philippines, and Scarlota and Knipp (2022) in Chile have tended to be concentrated upon student learning outcomes, with less attention to academic staff well-being. The study by Mkwizu and Mtae (2021) proposed that community engagement with educational institution settings be categorised as individual, institutional and governmental. In our current study, the individuals are female academics, and our focus is on their resilience and sustainability in African HE.

Resilience in higher education has also been examined by Bozkurt (2022) using systematic mapping methodologies where resilience, adaptability, and sustainability in higher education during the pandemic offered a new normal. Bozkurt (2022) used t-SNE analysis, text-mining, and social network analysis to derive findings that reflected three major themes, namely (1) resilience, adaptability, and sustainability; (2) psychological pressures, social uncertainty, and mental wellbeing of learners; and (3) the rise of online distance education and blended-hybrid modes (Bozkurt, 2022). Higher education can survive by adopting resilience, adaptability, and sustainability as the new normal. Mkwizu and Kimeto (2022) posited that the impact of citation metrics which marginalise knowledge in developing countries can be reduced through knowledge exchange via open access. Hence, our study adds to the body of knowledge on resilience and sustainability in higher education from an African female academic perspective using an autoethnographic approach.

Price (2023) examined resilience and wellbeing in higher education through a literature scoping review that considered students’ experiences. Price (2023) identified extra-curricular resilience and wellbeing programs as two major approaches to implementing resilience and well-being training in higher education. Adding to Price’s (2023) examination of student resilience in higher education, our study contributes by including a

focus on female academics in higher education. In the study by Bissessar et al. (2023) exploring female academic resilience in Guyana, Ireland and the USA, the findings showed that three female academics experienced challenges due to “blurred work boundaries, isolation from friends and family, concern for others’ health and the sacrifice of family time”. A positive experience that supported resilience was “taking the opportunity to ‘nest’ and practice ‘self-care’” (Bissessar et al., 2023).

Existing studies on resilience in higher education (Bissessar et al., 2023; Bordoloi et al., 2023; Price, 2023) concentrate on students’ experiences, and the challenges and coping strategies of female academics, during the Covid pandemic. To expand this area of research, our study seeks to focus upon a post-Covid reflection about resilience and sustainability in African higher education.

Method

Research design and participants

Our collaborative autoethnographical approach is adopted from the studies by Bordoloi et al. (2023) and Bissessar (2023) who explored female academics’ experiences of resiliency and sustainability in higher education during the pandemic. Collaborative autoethnography offers greater insights on the experiences of multidisciplinary teams that conduct research amidst complexity and intersectionality (Ratnapalan & Haldane, 2022), and also during the pandemic, as outlined by Roy and Uekusa (2020). According to Ratnapalan and Haldane (2022), the advantages of using collaborative autoethnography are narratives that enable the theorising of individual and/or collective experiences.

For these reasons, our article uses collaborative autoethnography to understand resilience and sustainability experiences from our perspectives as two female academics, from two countries (South Africa and Tanzania) where the responses to the pandemic differed. South Africa imposed a total lockdown while Tanzania did not. We introduce ourselves as "KY" from the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, and "KM" from Tanzania, now an independent researcher after successfully completing a post-doctoral program with The Open University of Tanzania. Prior to collaborating on this paper, we were engaged in developing an on-going global project proposal. As indicated in the introduction section, our study addresses five research questions through an open-ended exploration that gathers rich qualitative data. Together with relevant biographical data, our study used content analysis to extract emerging themes relevant to ascertaining resilience and sustainability amongst female academics in higher education within Africa.

Data collection and analysis

Using the approaches by Bordoloi et al. (2023), our paper divides the data collection into two phases. The first phase involved the distribution of questions to each other using email. Due to the different geographical locations, the use of email was deemed viable and sufficient for distribution and accessibility of the questionnaire. The obtained responses in terms of the emerged themes and sub-themes guided data collection for the second phase

which involved a one-on-one online interview in order to probe further on the issues of resilience and sustainability in higher education experienced during the pandemic. The synchronous, one-on-one online interview for the second phase of data collection was conducted via Microsoft Teams and deemed a convenient method for the qualitative data collection. The application of Microsoft Teams for the second phase provided ease of data collection because the participants (KY and KM) are from different countries within Africa. To successfully carry out the two online interviews, the first interview involved participant KY interviewing KM and then the second interview engaged participant KM interviewing KY. The two online interviews were recorded for purposes of data analysis.

Content analysis was the selected technique used to extract relevant themes from the collected qualitative data. The process of transcribing and summarising qualitative data collected from each interview was shared for purposes of conducting the content analysis. In addition, before the application of content analysis, our responses were compiled to reflect our answers that were re-shared and subjected to approval by us. Therefore, if there was any information that we did not feel comfortable to share was withdrawn so as to adhere to ethical considerations. In view of this, all the information expressed by us are purely personal opinions from our individual lived experiences. Furthermore, the content analysis involved coding, summarising and interpreting for purposes of establishing themes relevant to understand resilience in higher education for sustainability. The themes were extracted from two female academics' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic to guide improvements of higher education institutions post-pandemic. Creswell and Creswell (2018) added that a qualitative approach is innovative and can work more within the researcher-designed frameworks. In our study, the qualitative approach through collaborative autoethnographic is applied and analysed using content analysis.

Limitations of this study

One limitation of our study is that it is qualitative with the application of collaborative autoethnography and content analysis using our lived experiences. Therefore, future studies may opt for quantitative approaches. In addition, both of us experienced the pandemic as single individuals without the added responsibilities of mothering and extended family commitments.

Findings

Our profiles for the collaborative autoethnography are provided in Table 1. The codes are KY as the participant from South Africa and KM as the participant from Tanzania. Our profiles are similar in terms of age group, level of education and marital status. We are educated middle aged female academics who were single at the time of this study's interviews. The differences in our profiles are reflected in terms of the country and positions in higher education.

Table 1: Participant profiles

Variables	Participant 1 (KY)	Participant 2 (KM)
Age group	46 – 55	46 – 55
Country	South Africa	Tanzania
Level of education	PhD	PhD
Marital status	Single	Single
Position in higher education	Associate Professor	Researcher

Table 2 provides a summary of the three themes and eight sub-themes that emerged after content analysis and coding was employed on the qualitative data. These emergent themes address resilience and sustainability in higher education using the experiences of two African female academics during the pandemic. Tables 3 and 4 summarise our recommendations for resilience and our post-Covid reflections,

Table 2: Themes, sub-themes and codes for resilience in higher education

Themes	Sub-themes and codes
Experiences	Positive personal experiences (PPEs1) Positive professional experiences (PPEs2) Challenges (C)
Resilience (coping strategies)	Connection to social environment (CSE) Professional growth and development (PGD) Work-life balance (WLB) Useful personal traits (UPI)
Sustainability	Practice of learning experiences (PLEs) Embrace online teaching/learning/training (EO) Readiness to use new technology to communicate (R)

Recommendations for resilience of female academics in higher education

Table 3: Recommendations for resilience of female academics in higher education

Participant	Recommendations
KY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To prepare as best as possible for change and to adapt to the situation rather than resist it. - To be mindful that work can consume you and chances of burnout are high. - To maintain a balance (which I could not achieve unfortunately). I could have engaged with hobbies or done other activities but I did not.
KM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flexibility to accept changes induced by a pandemic. - Communication through different apps like WhatsApp and Zoom when not able to meet physically due to a pandemic. - Balance personal and professional roles through time management

Post-Covid reflections on resilience and sustainability of female academics

Table 4: Post-Covid reflections on resilience and sustainability of female academics in higher education

Participant	Post-Covid reflections
KY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To be flexible and “humane” as it allows better relationship, development with others (so you do not get stressed unduly). - To rest, sleep and eat well. - To do things that assist with mental well-being. - To develop support structures even if online, as these can help you find someone to care for you (even at a distance) in times of grief or illness.
KM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adaptation to new ways of doing things. - Culture of sharing knowledge. - Readiness to learn new technologies. - Networking for opportunities such as book chapter contributions

Discussion of findings

The findings revealed that although there were challenges, there were also positive experiences both personally and professionally during the Covid-19 pandemic. Concerning the theme of *experiences*, we agreed upon three sub-themes as summarised in Table 2 and discussed below: positive personal experiences, positive professional experiences and challenges.

Positive personal experiences

Our positive personal experiences show that both of us were engaged with helping others during the pandemic, especially students and fellow colleagues. For example, KY was more “flexible and accommodating of students by listening, enabling, empowering, exercising and practicing a pedagogy of care” whereas KM shifted to “virtual interactions to help colleagues through training”. Although there is similarity of positive personal experiences observed for the two participants, there are differences between KY and KM, and these are narrated as:

My cell phone [mobile phone] served as a “lifeline” for communication, and I found myself being contacted and responding to students at all hours of the day or night (KY, South Africa)

Personal development in terms of skills from learning new technologies, able to travel within the country due to no lockdown in our country and enjoyed personal life (KM, Tanzania)

From these narratives, it is implied that as female academics in higher education, KY’s positive personal experience is themed as utilising her cell phone to serve students while KM noted of developing skills from new technologies, travels and enjoying life in general. The findings differ from Bissessar et al. (2023), who revealed self-care and ‘nesting’ as

positive experiences during the pandemic; a difference that could be attributed to our situational preferences. For example, in our study, it was easy for KM to travel within Tanzania due to no lockdown restrictions.

Positive professional experiences

Findings from KY with reference to positive professional experiences have shown that she experienced compassion, care, flexibility and outreach which she considered as a priority, even with issues that were not directly related to teaching and learning. She also became accustomed to online design and delivery of classes and taught a large group (of 463 4th year students) of in a year module closely linked to the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) program and there was also, one-to-one engagements which she found easier to manage. In addition, KY stated that classes moving to evenings/nights and Saturdays for the online mode worked well and is a continued practice because it suited the adult students that she now teaches, almost all of whom are employed. More positive professional experiences by KY revealed that she has offered Blackboard as a learning platform and used WhatsApp for those who had device or connectivity issues. She also explained that:

In my 18 years as a lecturer in higher education, I had never engaged with parents. For the first time, parents contacted me to say how much they were learning through the work I was doing with their children. I felt as though teaching and learning became a lecturer-family, lecturer-community event that made the impact of my work enjoyable and a far higher reach than I would ever imagine possible (KY, South Africa)

KY's research project had proceeded well notwithstanding the different mode, and she reflected more on the "gifts" of Covid instead of just the challenges. According to KY, the pandemic offered a "forced opportunity" for doing things differently. Hence, KY's abilities like compassion, lecturer-family, lecturer-community reveals the positive professional experiences during the global pandemic as a female academic in South Africa.

On the other hand, KM, in Tanzania not experiencing a lockdown during the global pandemic, was professionally able to attend virtual conferences, webinars and workshops as well as engage in academic publications. Further positive professional experiences by KM are elaborated as:

Assist fellow PhD students where my training and teaching capabilities were being exercised. In the event where we could not meet or I could not go there physically then obviously because they had a group, so they created Zoom sessions where if they needed training or some teaching to assist them then Zoom was the communication platform (KM, Tanzania)

For KM, it is clear that the positive professional experiences were mostly the ability to continue her engagements in conferences, workshops, webinars and academic publications. These findings differ from Bozkurt (2022) because our study provides positive professional experiences of a female academic in higher education during the

pandemic, using an autoethnographical approach, in contrast to a systematic literature review of published articles.

Our positive personal and professional experiences indicate that in the midst of the global pandemic, there were positive experiences. Importantly, our research activities such as research projects, conferences and workshops to share research output continued in a virtual space. These findings align with comments by others about the professional lives of academics revolving around research and research outputs (e.g. Groenewald & Teise, 2024). However, we reflected more widely on the *challenges* encountered during the pandemic as female academics in higher education.

Challenges

Both of us faced social, psychological, technological, and personal and professional challenges. The reasons for this similarity were the need to adapt to technology due to going completely into online teaching and learning, and to adjust to personal and professional online social interactions. The challenges, included health for KY, are further elaborated on and discussed below.

Health

In this study, KY experienced health challenges, stating that:

A burst ulcer made me hospitalised for a few days, back and shoulder ache, lack of exercise, eyesight taking a toll because of the computer screen, and I worked many more hours than usual and later started feeling burnt out (KY, South Africa)

The health challenges experienced by KY are summarised as “burnout”. This finding aligns with Abu Talib et al. (2021) who cited negative effects upon individuals due to the pandemic. KY suffered health-wise and could not sustain working more hours, notable as a challenge in resilience and sustainability experiences.

Social

The social challenges that we experienced indicate that we had to stay away from friends and relatives due to social distancing. Interestingly, KY was alone during the pandemic and her social life suffered and this was because she found herself alone in a new city making her isolation more acute. In Tanzania, “there was social distancing which required having to take extra precautions and limiting physical interactions with friends and relatives, therefore restraining meeting with large groups of people and no physical attendance at conferences” (KM, Tanzania).

Psychological

Findings on psychological challenges show that KY needed to ask for assistance when necessary because she missed not being around people. When she was ill, her fears were more acute as the pandemic added danger to being hospitalised. KY also struggled emotionally because of the travel restrictions that prevented her physically saying goodbye to a very close friend who passed away as a result of pancreatic cancer. KY added that:

I was emotionally a little overwhelmed and drained because of dealing/supporting students and their issues, especially with the undergraduate classes (KY, South Africa)

Emotional set-backs from not being able to physically say goodbye to a close friend and colleague that passed away as a result of pancreatic cancer (KY, South Africa)

Due to no lockdown for KM, there was no mention of psychological experiences. These findings imply that KM had limited psychological challenges, while KY experienced various psychological challenges, namely missing being with people, having fear, feeling overwhelmed and drained. These findings are similar to the study by Bozkurt (2022) who summarised a key theme under psychological pressures in higher education.

Technological

Technological challenges that were experienced by KY arose when her research project's data gathering process took on a new "face". She had a big project in Limpopo where she had to prepare participants in rural Limpopo for online focus groups and visual participatory processes. She had to improvise by hiring a student to teach them how to use Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Furthermore, there was anxiety as electricity and Internet connectivity was a problem for KY (South Africa). Another technological challenge was the shift from traditional ways of communication to going completely online (KM, Tanzania). Although we experienced technological challenges, there were similarities, including the need to adapt to technologies, transitioning to online, and unreliable Internet connection. These findings echo Bordoloi et al. (2023) who mentioned technological challenges during the pandemic, such as poor Internet connectivity, as the participants were from developing countries, hence contextual similarities.

Personal and professional challenges

The personal and professional challenges that emerged from us indicate that despite our geographical differences, we both had challenges during the pandemic. KY mentioned that "I personally faced social life and space challenges, and I lost a close friend of 35 years to cancer, and I was grieving". Professionally, KY added that "most of the postgraduate programs I teach have a research component, and the pandemic changed the mode of data gathering". There was also "over-sitting due to the many online sessions during teaching" (KY, South Africa). Other professional challenges included:

... no fieldwork and community engagements except online with data gathering. Taking my students' calls and messages at odd hours became a norm, and the division between work and personal life became integrated. I can say that I worked all the time. I was stuck at home and beyond the everyday cleaning, cooking or sleeping, I found myself working non-stop (KY, South Africa)

For KM, the personal challenge was the inability to travel outside the country. Besides this personal challenge, KM did experience professional challenges, commenting that:

Learning new technologies was a professional challenge during the global pandemic ... (KM, Tanzania)

Our reporting on personal and professional challenges indicates that we did experience these, including those named as “social life and space challenges”; “losing friends”; “grieving”; “changed mode of data gathering”; “over-sitting”; “no fieldwork and community engagements except online with data gathering”, “taking my students’ calls and messages at odd hours became a norm”; “division between work and personal life became integrated”; “working all the time”; “inability to travel outside the country”; and “learning new technologies”. These findings support recommendations from Abu Talib et al. (2021) that, due to the pandemic, there were rises in challenges related to balancing personal and professional life. There are also differences between findings from our study and Abu Talib et al. (2021), because our study has narrated the reasons for the challenges in balancing personal and professional life from the perspective of female academics in higher education.

Resilience (coping strategies) for female academics in higher education

Concerning the theme of resilience (coping strategies), our findings revealed four sub-themes as summarised in the resilience rows of Table 2: connecting to social environment, professional growth and development, work-life-balance, and useful personal traits.

Connecting to social environment

My coping strategies when connecting to the social environment were based on working. At times my relationship with students might have been more personal as I made a few friends, that ordinarily I may not have made if I had reported to work in a regular way (KY, South Africa).

In Tanzania, KM noted that she received support from friends and family as well as renewing ties and friendships with old networks online, that gave her the opportunity to participate in online conferences, workshops and seminars (KM, Tanzania).

Professional growth and development

In terms of professional growth and development, KY revealed that she sought solace on social media by spending time on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter in a professional capacity, chatting and being part of a large global network of teachers, lecturers and academics who were all trying to cope with and survive the pandemic. She also created a professional online presence which she continues with to this day. KY remarked that:

Availability of devices and online connectivity was key to my professional role. I did not struggle in this regard, and I have a lovely “at home office”. In this respect, I was fine. I was able to transition easily to online T&L and research, and to use social media for networking (KY, South Africa)

Similarly, the coping strategies for KM in terms of professional growth and development shows that she spent time contributing a chapter to a book “Open higher education in the 21st century” (Mkwizu & Mtae, 2021), engaging in self-directed learning and consultancies. KM observed that:

I did engage in collaborative research and publications. Also, attending courses, webinars, conferences, trainings and workshops online and most of all adapting to technology (KM, Tanzania)

These findings imply that we had many coping strategies during the pandemic that were related to professional growth and development, including using social media for work, creating professional online presences, having a home office, contributing to a book chapter and engaging in collaborative research and publications.

Work-life balance

Work-life balance indicated that KY created “an amazing workspace home office” and being in it was a sense of achievement while KM travelled within the country since there was no lockdown in Tanzania.

Useful personal traits

The useful personal traits during the pandemic for us both were “ability to perform assigned tasks for the benefit of others”; and “networking with other academics and professional entities, attending online webinars, seminars, courses, etc”. However, KY’s additional useful personal traits were “transitioning easily to online”; “I had no responsibilities other than myself”; “spent a lot more time on WhatsApp with others”; “found alternative ways to conduct research”; “able to be flexible and to adapt”; “I accepted the new normal, willingly and actively”; and “may be being alone is a blessing, not a vice as I heard how others had to deal with children, job losses, financial issues”. Likewise, KM’s useful personal traits were:

Manoeuvring through the technology and understanding different features within the apps, for example, Zoom and Air meet, Google Meet, etc. Managing different time zones for the various international online conferences or training. I was not that much of a WhatsApp individual, so I had to now make calls using WhatsApp. During the Covid, I had to use WhatsApp more often, so I professionally became resilient technologically (KM, Tanzania)

Evidently, these findings on our resilience in higher education for sustainability suggests that there was a combination of coping strategies we applied, ranging from flexibility, networking, to technology adaptation. For KM as an ODL (open and distance learning) graduate, these findings support Mkwizu and Mtae (2021) who indicated how community stakeholders categorised an individual as an ODL graduate as they were engaged in research activities using technology, even during the pandemic. Our results also support Bordoloi et al. (2023) in terms of technology learning during training, teaching and research activities like online conferences. However, there are differences between these two studies, for example, in our study, KY from South Africa found it easy to create a “home office” while for Bordoloi et al. (2023), the female academics from India and the Philippines found it difficult at first to convert their home into a “home office” initially although with time and support from family members, it became possible to attain a good “work from home” experience in home office spaces.

Sustainability for female academics in higher education

Additionally, our findings further showed that when it comes to sustainability, several themes emerged, as summarised in the sustainability rows of Table 2.

Practice of learning experiences

We opined that the practice of learning experiences applied in the pandemic was the shift to online learning, teaching and training. This implies that our experiences as female academics corresponds with previous studies such as Abu Talib et al. (2021) who discussed the forced shift to online due to the pandemic. Additionally, our findings for practices of learning experiences from the pandemic compared to now in the post-pandemic indicated the themes for “the pandemic taught me to embrace, prepare and cope with change” (KY, South Africa) and “adaptability” (KM, Tanzania). This shows that for KY, the pandemic experiences in terms of practices of learning experiences involved embracing, preparing and coping with change whilst for KM, it is adapting to change.

Embrace online teaching

Furthermore, the pandemic did impact our practice of learning experiences now compared to the pandemic period, with KY stating that “My professional life changed significantly, I teach only online and the pandemic drove a work routine that was not balanced. It was harmful to my wellbeing so I resorted to work hard and play hard too” (KY, South Africa). Equally, KM opined on engagement with “online forums and discussions” (KM, Tanzania). Our findings on practice of learning experiences regarding willingness, enthusiasm and acceptance of technology now, compared to the pandemic, indicate that there are “preferences for blended learning, accustomed to online learning, and readiness to use new technology for communication” (KM, Tanzania). Moreover, KY also mentioned that “I can find people to connect with online and the Internet made the world a smaller place”; “developed skills with technology out of need and necessity”; “I learned that being alone can be a huge blessing and I have grown accustomed to it”; and “I can work from anywhere and at any time”. KY described that:

I learned how to teach in a humanising way and in a way that infuses a pedagogy of care. I can be part of a bigger world than just a geographical location of where I am. It has opened up more opportunities and insights. Technology is something that interests me, like the recent conversations with ChatGPT had me engaging with others, so teaching with tech is part of my DNA now. Post the pandemic, I am eager to be part of the advancement not only as a user but as a creator. I still engage with technology for many hours and now it is a way of life. To be without it is difficult and inconvenient. It is now who I am and what I do (KY, South Africa)

Readiness to use new technology

Considering the sustainability aspect in terms of practice of learning experiences, we were impacted professionally by interacting online and we were willing, enthusiastic and accepting towards technology, through traits of readiness, humaneness and engagement. These findings differ from Bozkurt (2022), due to our use of collaborative autoethnography and the additional inclusion of sustainability in deconstructing resiliency.

These findings also correspond with Mkwizu (2022) for the need to theorise context and situation based on African perspectives, thus contributing towards building research with rich theories that are African-based and emanate from research done in Africa. Most importantly, our findings with reference to learning experiences including technological experiences align with Uleanya and Yassim's (2023) vision of Africa as a sustainable continent equipped with infrastructure towards the 4IR supporting vision 2063 of the African Union's agenda. KY's experience of work routine that was not balanced and was harmful to her wellbeing sends a signal to the education practitioners to ensure that the wellbeing of female academics in higher education for sustainability is given priority.

Recommendations on resilience in higher education for female academics

Our recommendations on resilience in higher education, summarised in Table 3, revealed that it is mostly the ability to be embracing that the pandemic has brought a "forced opportunity" to conduct education activities online, which is valuable for current and future readers. KY added that:

It is important to be mindful that work can consume you and chances of burnout are high ... (KY, South Africa)

While KM recommended on being adaptable by saying:

Balance personal and professional roles through time management ... (KM, Tanzania)

Our further recommendations on resilience in higher education are "to prepare as best as possible for change and to adapt to the situation rather than resist it"; and "communication through different apps like WhatsApp and Zoom when not able to meet physically due to a pandemic".

Post-Covid reflections on resilience and sustainability in higher education

Provision of post-Covid reflections, summarised in Table 4, are important with regard to resilience and sustainability in higher education. Our findings revealed interesting themes. KY elaborated by saying:

To be flexible and "humane" as it allows better relationship development with others (so you do not get stressed unduly) ... (KY, South Africa)

While KM commented that:

Adaptation to new ways of doing things including the use of Otter Pilot in Microsoft Teams that assists in attending meetings for purposes of recording the minutes... (KM, Tanzania)

Further reflections from our findings on resilience and sustainability are: "to do things that assist with mental well-being"; "to rest, sleep and eat well"; "to develop support structures even if online, as these can help find someone to care for you (even at a

distance) in times of grief or illness”; “culture of sharing knowledge”; “readiness to learn new technologies”; and “networking for opportunities such as book chapter contributions”. “Culture of sharing knowledge” supports Mkwizu and Kimeto (2022) since it presents a succinct and notable key point about the Covid-19 pandemic period: “the greatest lesson from the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that rapid OA [open access] publication is the future so that knowledge exchange can be impactful to society at large” (Mkwizu & Kimeto, 2022). The culture of knowledge exchange can also be a good opportunity to provide research experiences. Our study also supports the idea that “rapid OA publication is the future” because it can build larger, more inclusive, better sustainable and more impactful communities of research practice. Our study also recognises that knowledge exchange can enable participation and contribution of a "voice" on behalf of one's own local and regional communities from a research perspective.

In the discussion of findings, our article highlights contributions to the body of knowledge on resilience and sustainability in higher education from two female academics' experiences using an autoethnographic approach, based on the specific objectives:

- a. Challenges during the pandemic that we faced as female academics in higher education institutions were mostly technological and social. But there were also positive personal and professional experiences, such as “learning new technologies”; “forced opportunity”; “gifts of Covid-19 pandemic”; “research”; “lecturer-family”; “lecturer-community event”, and in addition, for the case of KM, “the ability to travel within the country due to no lockdown in Tanzania”.
- b. The resilience (coping strategies) in our professional and personal roles included traits like flexibility, humaneness, and adaptability as a theoretical implication in deconstructing resilience during the pandemic.
- c. Sustainability for female academics in higher education according to our findings revealed three core themes which are “practices of learning experiences”; “embracing online teaching/ learning/ training”; and “readiness to use new technology to communicate”.
- d. As female academics, our recommendations for resilience include managing time, embracing technology and sharing knowledge.
- e. Our post-Covid reflections on resilience and sustainability included being flexible, humane, builder of support structures, and ready to learn new technologies and knowledge sharing.

Conclusion

Our paper has impact in understanding female academics in higher education for South Africa and Tanzania using an autoethnographic approach. Furthermore, our study addresses the challenges we faced as female academics as well as showing resilience in our personal and professional roles. Most importantly, we avail our recommendations and post-pandemic reflections with reference to resilience in higher education for sustainability. Generally, we experienced technological and social challenges. There were also differences in challenges since Tanzania did not have a lockdown during the entire

pandemic while South Africa had lockdowns. In addition, as female academics, the issue of sustainability in terms of practices of learning experiences is themed to recommend blended learning as a way forward. Apart from the theoretical implications of deconstructing resilience theory, our paper adds a practical implication for education practitioners to encourage female academics in higher education, especially in the post-pandemic period, to balance personal and professional roles, consider their mental wellbeing, and engage in networking. The outcome of our study provides perspectives that are African-based and can assist the education sector towards the kind of 4IR that effectively support the African Union (AU) agenda of vision 2063 as well as STISA-2024 (Uleanya & Yassim, 2023; STISA, 2024).

Availing our recommendations on time management as well as post-pandemic reflections includes engaging in humane acts, embracing technology, and a culture of sharing knowledge. Our study involved only two female academics, which is a limitation. Future studies may explore larger samples and engage a diverse range of contexts and circumstances, to advance the use of collaborative autoethnographic reflection as a valuable research methodology. We believe that may be especially relevant in the cases of patriarchal societies, developing countries with language barriers, and artificial intelligence adoption. In post-pandemic reflections, our suggestions for future research include further examination of the concepts of a "culture of sharing knowledge", "forced opportunity" and "humane acts".

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