School of Management Studies

Voices from the margins: Amplifying the workplace realities of child-free black women in South Africa

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Abstract

The rising number of individuals identifying as child-free has sparked a growing interest in understanding this demographic's unique challenges and opportunities. Despite progress in South Africa's equality legislation, child-free black women remain marginalised, frequently confronting stereotypes and assumptions that challenge both their personal and professional identities. This study explores these specific dynamics through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 22 child-free black women in South Africa, exploring how 'race', 'gender', and 'child-free' status intersect to shape their workplace experiences. All women were formally employed and resided in South Africa, identifying as black, and between the ages of 24 – 38, with at least two years of full-time working experience. Through an intersectional lens and the application of role theory, this paper provides a nuanced perspective on how child-free individuals navigate and negotiate their roles and identities. Thematic analysis was employed to explore the data, delving into participant's insights and perspectives to gain a thorough understanding of their lived realities. The study's findings revealed the opportunities and challenges faced by child-free black women in their workplace. Three key themes emerged that reflected child-free black women's lived experiences in the South African workplace: (1) The availability paradox: navigating time and identity in child-free lives, (2) Redefining family at work: child-free identities within organisational norms, (3) Unseen needs: fostering inclusive spaces for child-free workers. Through these findings, recommendations for improving workplace support for child-free black women are presented.

Keywords: Voluntary child-free, child-freeness in the workplace, intersectionality, role theory, workplace inclusivity, South Africa and global South

List of terms

Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA)

Broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE)

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

Employment Equity Act (EEA)

Socio-economic status (SES)

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Work-life balance (WLB)

Work-life conflict (WLC)

United Kingdom (UK)

United States (US)

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Note on format. This paper follows the format prescribed by the Section of Organisational Psychology at the University of Cape Town and the 7th edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in understanding employees' perspectives of work and personal life (Kelliher et al., 2019; Sirgy & Lee, 2018; Spieler et al., 2018). Organisations have come to recognise the challenges employees experience combining work, family and life demands, resulting in the implementation of various policies, practices, and interventions to support working parents (Bagger & Li, 2014; Dahl et al., 2016; Haas & Hwang, 2019; Spitzmueller et al., 2016; Thébaud & Halcomb, 2019). Such accommodations include flexible work arrangements, parental leave policies and on-site subsidised childcare provisions (Perrigino et al., 2018). In recent years these provisions have extended to other marginalised groups in the workplace such as breastfeeding/lactating mothers, same-sex couples, and single employees (Radcliffe et al., 2022; Stefanidis & Strogilos, 2020; Wilkinson & Rouse, 2023). Although there has been some progress in extending work-life policies to a broader range of individuals, employees without children remain largely excluded from these initiatives. There is a growing need to address the unique needs of diverse worker groups in work-life balance (WLB) policies (Gragnano et al., 2020). However, research reveals a lack of organisational support for child-free professionals (Wilkinson et al., 2017, 2018).

Research has demonstrated that there is an increase in child-freeness globally (Bongaarts, 2015; Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017; Miettinen et al., 2015). This can be explained by the notable increase in women's representation in professional roles in recent years (Casale et al., 2021). For example, female labour force participation in South Africa rose from 48.8% in 2010 to 54.3% in 2023 (Niymbanira & Sabela, 2019; Statistics South Africa, 2023). These changes have important implications for family-building experiences, including women's child-bearing patterns (Masebe & Ramosebudi, 2015). In South Africa, fertility rates are decreasing while child-free rates are steadily increasing (Statistics South Africa, 2019). Between 1960 and 2011, there was a decrease in fertility from seven children per woman to 2.6 children per woman. While an updated census on child-freeness, fertility, and childbearing age in South Africa has been lacking for over 13 years, it is reasonable to anticipate that these patterns have remained stable, mirroring trends observed in many other countries in recent years (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017; Miettinen et al., 2015)

With the rising number of individuals without children, particularly women, there is an increasing need for organisations to understand the work-life experiences unique to this demographic. Research on WLB has focused almost exclusively on the work-life conflict

(WLC) among parents and has failed to include employees without children (Blight et al., 2022; Boiarintseva et al., 2022; Mumford et al., 2023; Verniers, 2020). However, work-life policies are desired by all individuals, not just those with children (Williams & Multhaup, 2018). It is assumed that child-free women have little WLC because they deviate from the typical nuclear family structure (França, 2022; Ter Hoeven et al., 2017). Female employees who do not ascribe to traditional family norms claim that work-related obligations interfere with their personal lives (Perrigino et al., 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2017). Parent-focused WLB policies and practices are partly upheld by stereotypes about child-free employees (Filippi et al., 2024). Child-free employees are perceived to be less of a priority and less deserving of accessing work-life policies (Blight et al., 2022; Filippi et al., 2024; Perrigino et al., 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2017).

Presumptions regarding the centrality of child-free workers' professional identities cause them to feel marginalised and ignored in work environments that value parenthood, making them less qualified for or even less likely to have access to flexible work schedules (Chung et al., 2022; Filippi et al., 2024). Child-free employees often encounter increased work demands, as they are frequently expected to work late hours or handle heavier workloads compared to their colleagues with children (Verniers, 2020). However, despite not having children, these workers lead active lives and often hold caring responsibilities, underscoring the need to understand their work-life dynamics (Casper & Swanberg, 2009; Williams & Multhaup, 2018).

Implementing WLB policies enhances employee well-being, organisational performance, and behaviours like engagement and satisfaction while reducing stress and turnover (Chaudhuri et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020). Neglecting child-free women in WLB policies can exacerbate work-life conflict, leading to stress, burnout, and unfulfilled potential (Bakker et al., 2023; Nayak & Pandey, 2015). Organisations must address these needs to prevent role strain and promote harmony both at work and at home.

Most research on child-free experiences, decision-making, and lifestyles has been conducted in Northern contexts (see Filippi et al., 2024; França, 2022; Stiģe-Škuškovnika, 2022; Verniers, 2020; Wilkinson & Rouse, 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2017, 2018). Workers from the global South, particularly black individuals in the workplace face discrimination and bias, lack of representation, pressure to assimilate, and lack access to organisational resources (Dickens et al., 2019; Opara et al., 2020; Snyder & Schwartz, 2019). In the South African context, 'black' refers to the racial groups that were classified and subjected to discrimination under the apartheid system, including coloured, Indian, and Bantu populations. Since the establishment of democracy in 1994, the labels African, Black African, or Black have been

used instead of 'Bantu' (Manzo, 1998). Given the historical context that influences the lived experiences of many individuals in South Africa and the lack of child-free research on this demographic, this study aims to draw attention to the workplace experiences of child-free black[1] professionals, offering a more nuanced exploration of how multiple identities intersect and influence workplace dynamics.

Despite many organisations having a highly skilled young workforce, research remains scant about their work-life experiences (Verniers, 2020). Young professionals are typically more focused on career-building than childbearing (Wilkinson & Rouse, 2023). Thus, they often face a unique set of work-life pressures that go beyond family life, care, and children (Wilkinson et al., 2017). These include challenges associated with financial stability, financial freedom, and career progression (Wilkinson & Rouse, 2023). How they navigate this alongside their high job demands because they are child-free warrants further exploration (Sturges, 2012).

Young black female employees' experiences of navigating their child-free identity in the workplace are likely to be more nuanced than those found in previous literature. Researchers have been called upon to include and explore the experiences of individuals who have historically been neglected in work-family/life literature, including workers from non-traditional family compositions and of different genders, races, and national contexts (such as those from the global South) (Collins et al., 2019; Hintz & Tucker, 2023; McCracken, 2020). To this end, this study responds to these calls, offering a nuanced exploration of the work-life experiences of child-free[2] black professionals, elucidating their diverse challenges and opportunities within the South African context.

South African context of child-free black women

Despite having the lowest fertility rates among Sub-Saharan countries (Masebe & Ramosebudi, 2015), child-freeness has been underexplored in the South African context. It is essential to understand child-free women and how they manage their social, work, and family responsibilities in a predominantly pronatalist society. This society, defined by parenthood as a social norm and an inevitable part of human life, is deeply ingrained in South African culture and warrants thorough exploration (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016).

In many African societies which are inherently pronatalist, womanhood is often conflated with motherhood (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016), whereby a woman's value is dictated by her having children (Maponya, 2021). The ability to have children is frequently linked to one's identity, social status, and respect within the community (Dyer, 2007). Those who remain child-free, whether by choice or circumstance, face social consequences. They may be viewed as failures or incomplete within their communities, leading to social exclusion and reduced

opportunities (Chimbatata & Malimba, 2016). Child-free women in South African society face numerous challenges, including not being able to achieve adulthood status, being perceived as having a deviant personality, 'faulty' behaviour, or being possessed by evil spirits (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Mabasa, 2002). Thus, the South African landscape provides a distinctive opportunity to explore the concept of child-freeness due to its diverse cultural and religious communities, which encompass indigenous African traditions, religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism), and several other belief systems (Petersen, 2016). The diverse cultural activities, including ancestral worship, initiation rituals, and traditional healing ceremonies, consistently overlap with religious belief systems and shape the perception and treatment of infertility among indigenous South African tribes (Cilliers, 2007). For instance, within the amaXhosa cultural group, infertile women face stigmatisation and backlash being referred to as '*amadolo*', which means the infertile one (Diko, 2024). To navigate sociocultural norms that position them as 'deviant' and unnatural, child-free South African women are said to adopt numerous strategies, including playing along, being passive, and firmly adopting a child-free stance (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016).

During the apartheid era, the workplace was used as a mechanism to maintain and perpetuate segregation, migrant labour, job reservation, rights and benefits, and the overall white supremacist power structure (Mokoena, 2020). Although various laws and legislations have attempted to eradicate remnants of the past from workplaces, South African society has not been fully transformed. The workplace is still shaped by institutional racism, racialised power structures, and gender relations that are reflected in subtle cultural racism (Houston et al., 2022) and rife with stereotyping and discrimination, with black workers being perceived as unfit for skilled jobs (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021a). The economic prosperity and liberation of black individuals under such structures are severely suppressed and constrained. These constraints can be particularly stringent for black women, who are typically disadvantaged in the labour market and often restricted to lower-paying and less stable work opportunities (Ackermann & Velelo, 2015; Gradín, 2021). Black women continue to be subjected to stigmatisation and objectification due to their perceived lower social status (Mayer, 2017).

Current debates on child-freeness

Terminology to describe individuals who do not have children have been widely contested by authors. Terms such as 'childfree', 'childless', 'non-parent', 'voluntarily childless/childfree', 'involuntarily childless/childfree', 'childless not by choice', 'childless by choice', 'childless by circumstance' and 'temporarily child-free' have been a subject of ongoing debate, each carrying distinct connotations and reflecting different perspectives. These debates

reflect broader cultural, social, and ideological discussions about parenthood, identity, and societal norms.

Scholars originally used the term ‘childless’ to describe individuals without children. Not only did this leave no way to distinguish those who wanted children from those who did not (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012), but many scholars have criticised terms such as ‘childless’ and ‘non-parent’ for implying that without motherhood something is ‘lacking’ or ‘absent’ or ‘deficient’ in women’s lives (Gillespie, 2003; Hayfield et al., 2019). It is said that such terms seek to perpetuate societal norms that equate a woman’s worth with her ability to bear children (Verniers, 2020), further marginalising women who are child-free by choice or circumstance.

Over time, more terms have been proposed to avoid categorising all women without children and portraying them as incomplete or unfulfilled, rather than recognising their identities and life choices as valid and whole in their own right. For instance, Verniers (2020) uses the term ‘child-free’ to describe women who do not have biologically or socially related children (adopted children or stepchildren). Others use ‘childfree’ as a more accurate expression of the choice it describes (Bartlett, 1995; Gillespie, 2003; Stiģe-Škuškovnika, 2022). The term ‘childfree’ encompasses a complex reality, which can be divided into three main categories: women who are involuntarily child-free, women who are voluntarily child-free, and women who are temporarily childfree (Abma & Martinez, 2006). Although the term has gained widespread acceptance in recent years, scholars have noted that the term ‘childfree’ is divisive; some view it as empowering, while others find it problematic and may use it sparingly if at all (Hayfield et al., 2019).

Involuntary childlessness refers to individuals who wish to have children but cannot due to medical reasons, whether known or unexplained (Noack, 1996). Both Gouni et al. (2022) and Buhr and Huinink (2017) note that many definitions of involuntary childlessness are associated with medical issues, which exclude those who are child-free by circumstance. Thus, due to such narrow definitions, other scholars have expanded the definition of involuntarily child-free to include those who did not actively choose to be without children but were influenced by factors other than medical reasons. For example, those who want children but are unable to have them due to their relationship status (e.g., single, homosexual relationships and infertile couples) (Bodin et al., 2021). Other authors such as McQuillan et al. (2012) propose the term “child-free by circumstance” to account for factors like age, lack of a suitable partner, socio-economic challenges, or life priorities, acknowledging the complexity and diversity of women’s attitudes toward being child-free (Buhr & Huinink, 2017; Graham et al., 2013).

In contrast, authors such as Noack (1996) include those who have not had children due to inadequate conditions as being 'voluntarily childless'. Whereas others have described child-freeness as being voluntary when a person deliberately (freely) chooses not to have children (Gouni et al., 2022; Stiġe-Škuškovnika, 2022). Sometimes 'childless by circumstance' and the term 'temporarily child-free' are used interchangeably. Buhr and Huinink (2017) defined this as individuals who originally desired to have children or did not outright refuse to have children but intentionally delayed the establishment of a family. These individuals hold the belief that the essential requirements for becoming parents are not fulfilled at a certain moment (e.g., having a stable relationship with a compatible co-parent) or that the potential benefits of having a child are still too high due to their desire to pursue other life objectives (e.g., a fulfilling professional career) before starting a family. Other authors have used this term to describe those who are undecided or unsure about having children (Stiġe-Škuškovnika, 2022) or those who have not had children but expect to have children in the future (Abma & Martinez, 2006). Hence the term is also referred to as 'childless due to postponement or delayed childbearing'.

Thus, terminology and classification surrounding child-free individuals is evolving and everchanging. In this study, the term 'child-free'[2] is deliberately applied to create a distinction from childlessness. Child-free is the most used and the least disliked term among women (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Hayfield et al., 2019).

Benefits of being child-free: Freedom, flexibility, and fulfilment

The decision to be child-free has gained increasing attention in both societal discourse and academic research. While parenthood is often culturally and socially framed as a normative life goal, there is a growing body of literature that underscores the benefits of being child-free, especially from psychological, economic, and career-oriented perspectives. One of the most cited benefits by women of remaining child-free is the autonomy and personal freedom it affords (Coates-Davies, 2020). Women can pursue careers, hobbies, and personal development without the demands and responsibilities of child-rearing (Corbett, 2018). Child-free women can intentionally craft their lives to reflect their values, goals, and desires, rather than conforming to societal expectations surrounding motherhood (Settle & Brumley, 2014). This offers a more fulfilling and self-directed life for some (Corbett, 2018) and allows for spontaneous decisions regarding travel, relocation, or career changes (Park, 2005). Financial security is also deemed favourably. Raising children requires considerable financial investment. Hence many child-free women choose this path to ensure economic independence, emphasising the financial freedom associated with not having children and citing their ability to live comfortably and invest in personal interests, such as homeownership (Harrington, 2019).

Child-free individuals' enhanced sense of emotional and psychological well-being was also a central theme. The child-free choice is a way for women to resist patriarchal expectations and prioritise their well-being (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016). While societal pressures can lead to feelings of stigma, the freedom from parental obligations often contributes to higher levels of life satisfaction for child-free women, particularly in later life stages (Stahnke et al., 2020). Research suggests that this is a result of their ability to maintain autonomy and freedom throughout their lives, coupled with strong social and romantic relationships and meaningful pursuits (Keizer & Schenk, 2012; Ruegemer & Dziengel, 2022; Stahnke et al., 2020), which in the absence of children, they can dedicate time to (Ruegemer & Dziengel, 2022).

Research aims and questions

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of black, female child-free professionals in the workplace. This will be achieved in two ways: (1) by gaining an in-depth understanding of the challenges and opportunities experienced by child-free black women in their workplace and (2) by exploring how identity markers such as 'race', 'gender', and 'child-free' status intersect with employment to shape child-free black women's realities.

Through this exploration, this study seeks to extend management research on combining work and life roles in the global South by using role theory with an intersectional lens to emphasise the social complexities of child-free black women. Further, this study seeks to offer valuable insights for organisations in identifying best practices to establish inclusive and supportive work environments that meet the needs and preferences of child-free black women. Given the above aims, the study is directed by the following research questions:

Research question 1: What are the workplace experiences of South African black female professionals who are child-free?

Research question 2: How does the child-free identity intersect with other personal and social identities such as 'race', 'gender', and 'social class'?

Significance of study

This study advances organisational psychology literature by integrating role theory and intersectionality to explore how race, gender and child-free status influence child-free black women's workplace experiences. To date, all published studies that have explored the topic of child-freeness in the workplace have been conducted in Northern contexts (see Filippi et al., 2024; França, 2022; Stiģe-Škuškovnika, 2022; Verniers, 2020; Wilkinson & Rouse, 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2017, 2018) and to the researcher's best understanding, only two studies exist on child-freeness in South African workplaces, both student dissertations (see Albertus, 2017; Marutlulle, 2020). This underscores the need to explore this topic from the global South. The

experiences of workers, often neglected in work-life research, particularly amongst marginalised identities in the Global South (Hintz & Tucker, 2023), are critical to understanding diverse familial compositions in the workplace (Boiarintseva et al., 2022). This study responds to calls to understand the lived realities of workers who are frequently overlooked in work-life research: child-free, black women (Ali et al., 2017; Beauregard et al., 2020; Özbilgin et al., 2011). Additionally, to the researcher's knowledge, there are no known studies that have utilised role theory and intersectionality to understand child-freeness in the workplace. This study is therefore, one of the first to apply role theory and intersectionality to child-free employees, offering a framework for understanding how individuals negotiate their identities in workplaces that prioritise parenthood (Stuhlmacher & Linnabery, 2013). By combining these theories, this study offers a useful framework to draw attention to the complex interplay of societal expectations, organisational practices, and identity.

This study offers black women a platform to share their lived realities, challenges, and opportunities in the workplace, thus amplifying their voices and narratives. This helps to counteract the historical underrepresentation and marginalisation of black women in various spheres of society and organisational research (Branch & Kasztelnik, 2023; Coles & Pasek, 2020). This study also holds policy implications related to family leave policies, flexible work arrangements, and benefits packages which could assist management in attracting and retaining child-free workers (Chaudhuri et al., 2020; Oludayo et al., 2018). By advocating for policies that accommodate diverse family structures and life choices, organisations can create more equitable and inclusive workplaces for all employees.

The current research also addresses the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically gender equality (SDG 5) and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). By exploring the experiences of child-free women, it provides insight into gender dynamics, stereotypes, and workplace inequalities, promoting gender equality in decision-making, family planning, and societal norms. In focusing on child-free black women, the research underscores the compounded discrimination faced by this group due to their race, gender, and child-free status.

Structure of dissertation

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter comprises the introduction, the research aims and questions and offers a broad overview of the current study. Chapter two provides a review of the current and prevalent literature concerning child-freeness and employment in the workplace. The review employs a distinctive theoretical framework integrating role theory with an intersectional lens. Chapter three presents the research method, which details the research approach, sampling, participants, procedure, and data analysis

technique. In chapter four, both the research findings and the resultant discussion are presented. Lastly, chapter five outlines the research contributions, implications, and limitations of the study and provides suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter begins by detailing the search method used to obtain the relevant literature. Thereafter, an overview of the studies on child-freeness in the workplace is provided. Child-freeness in the workplace is then explored through an integrated theoretical framework that combines role theory with an intersectional lens. The remainder of this chapter offers a review of the relevant body of knowledge on child-freeness and employment.

Literature search method

An initial Boolean search term of "child-free AND workplace" was entered into the Google Scholar database on the 16th of February 2024; however, the search yielded very few relevant results. As such, the Boolean term was broadened to source a variety of articles that related to the research undertaking where a broader search string of "childless" OR "child-free" OR "nonparent" AND "workplace" or "organisation" AND "professionals" or "employees" was applied and used in Google Scholar. From this, a few more articles were obtained. After reading the obtained literature, a narrow, more specific search was conducted on the 20th of February on Web of Science, Scopus, Ebscohost (Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, APA PsycInfo, MasterFILE Premier) and Google Scholar databases using the following search string "professional black female" OR "professional women of colour" OR "professional woman of colour" AND "workplace" OR "organisations" OR "companies" OR "businesses" or "business place" AND "childless" OR "child-free" OR "nonparent". The literature search was refined to include English sources and peer-reviewed articles; however, most of these articles had limited relevance to the current study. The few that were relevant had already been found in previous searches. One reason for this occurrence may have been due to the topic only recently gaining attention in organisational studies thus, there was a limited body of work available (Boiarintseva et al., 2022). As the Boolean searches did not yield sufficient articles, additional searches were conducted between the 26th of February and the 11th of March using the following keywords and their synonyms ("childfree women and workplace", "childless women and workplace", "nonparent and workplace", "experiences of child-free") interchangeably across a variety of databases such as Google Scholar, Research Gate, Scopus, JSTOR and Ebscohost. From the various methods utilised, a total of 40 articles were sourced.

Additional articles on child-freeness were also searched for periodically on Google Scholar as an ongoing practice. A summary of these articles can be found in Appendix A, Table 1.

Literature review

Overview of studies

Having reviewed the literature yielded from the above search process; certain trends were established. Firstly, a lot of research has been conducted on child-freeness since the early 2000's. Yet, research related to child-freeness in the workplace only emerged around 2014, indicating that the phenomenon is still relatively new in organisational studies. Secondly, the review indicated that both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used to study the phenomenon, with qualitative studies only gaining traction in recent years. Thirdly, research on child-freeness in the workplace has predominantly emerged from the global North, with only six studies focusing on the global South, three of which were based in Africa (Akanji et al., 2020; Jacobs, 2017; Marutlulle, 2020). Thus, indicating that local knowledge is available but limited. This could be due to various socio-economic, cultural, and academic factors. Countries in the North have experienced growing societal shifts regarding family structures and individual autonomy over the past several decades (e.g., Miettinen, 2015). Conversely, in more traditional societies, such as those in parts of the global South, research on child-freeness remains limited. Marriage and subsequently, parenthood are often still regarded as a fundamental milestone of adult life, and the choice to remain child-free is less accepted (Diko, 2024; Okpan & Otega, 2021; Tatira, 2016). As a result of deeply ingrained societal norms and cultural expectations that prioritise traditional family structures, there is very little public discourse on the issue of child-freeness in global South contexts, which has impacted its presence in scholarship (Diko, 2024; Hintz & Tucker, 2023; Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2019). Lastly, the review of the literature showed limited application of theoretical frameworks in understanding child-freeness in the workplace. Thus, this study addresses this gap by utilising role theory and intersectionality to provide a nuanced and deeper understanding of child-freeness in workplace contexts.

Theoretical framework: Integrating role theory and intersectionality

Understanding the experiences of child-free women requires a multifaceted approach. Thus, this study employed a hybrid theoretical framework combining role theory with an intersectional lens. Role theory explores the nature of role demands and underscores the importance of social contexts in shaping individuals' behaviours and interactions within particular roles (Biddle, 1986; Kahn et al., 1964; Katz, 1978). Intersectionality extends this

focus by highlighting how broader social structures, power dynamics, and systems of oppression, inequality, and privilege intersect to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities and (re)produce power relations (Crenshaw, 2013). Although role theory is rarely integrated with an intersectional lens, this study combines these theoretical approaches to achieve a nuanced exploration of how individuals experience child-freeness in the workplace and how they negotiate their roles and identities across different social contexts.

Role theory. Individuals assume multiple roles (e.g., gender, caring, career and status roles) in their daily lives and, in performing these roles, form part of certain social groups (Badura et al., 2018; Biddle, 1986; Livingston, 2014; Matta et al., 2015). Based on these roles, individuals may experience certain behavioural expectations and 'obligations' to maintain their social group membership (Anglin et al., 2022), leading to role conflict (Biddle, 1986). Role conflict occurs when an individual faces simultaneous and incompatible behavioural expectations from different people, which cannot be reconciled (Biddle, 1986). This conflict can result in tensions, stress, and difficulties, known as role strain (Goode, 1960), and the need for coping behaviours, known as role negotiation (Biddle, 1986; Stuhlmacher & Linnabery, 2013). In the contemporary workplace, where both work and life responsibilities are increasingly demanding, local and international research on work-family and WLC has shown how today's workforce – especially working women – experiences the challenges of achieving balance amidst the demands of navigating multiple roles (Raina et al., 2020). For working women, typical roles may involve being employees, friends, daughters, partners, wives, and daughters-in-law (Akanji et al., 2020; Jaga & Guetterman, 2023). As individuals typically occupy multiple intersecting roles– career, life, and family roles compete for attention, adversely impacting the employee through personal strain or behaviour-related role pressure (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kahn et al., 1964). Should this conflict persist, employees may encounter role overload, where they struggle to complete their responsibilities due to the demanding nature and time restrictions of their positions (Bakker et al., 2023).

Research suggests that child-free women, for example, face role conflict as they navigate career advancement, relationship building, and being the 'ideal worker' (Wilkinson & Rouse, 2023). The 'ideal worker' is a discursive, rather than literal persona, characterised by masculine qualities, dedicated to their career, constantly accessible for work, and unburdened by familial or caring obligations (Acker, 1990). In most capitalist countries where there are expectations of prioritising work, this 'ideal worker' is normalised and is a problem that tends to predominantly impact child-free individuals (Utoft, 2020; Williams & Multhaup, 2018). This idealised image of the worker is deeply ingrained in organisational cultures and practices

(Zanhour & Sumpter, 2024). According to Chung et al. (2022), today's ideal worker is infinitely available regardless of time and location, perpetually connected to the workplace. Thus, prioritising non-work obligations, such as self-care, leisure or caregiving can be challenging due to these ideal worker role requirements (Filippi et al., 2024; França, 2022; Wilkinson et al., 2017). These obligations, whether related to work, caregiving, or personal needs, compete for limited time, often resulting in role conflict (Biddle, 1986). This imbalance contributes to time poverty, where disparities emerge in how individuals experience and manage their time (Georgiadou & Damianidou, 2023). Thus, role theory provides a rich framework for understanding child-free women's experiences in the workplace and how they navigate this identity alongside their expected social roles to be a caretaker, nurturer, child-bearer, friend, partner, daughter and sister within their homes/communities (Akanji et al., 2020; Jaga & Guetterman, 2023). A theory that assists with understanding how these social identities intersect, will be explored next.

Intersectionality. Intersectionality is a feminist theory that offers the analytical tools to understand how identities, such as gender, race and class are shaped by structures of power and oppression in society. It understands systems of power and oppression as complex, interlocking, and intricate, shaping how individuals and groups experience their own identities (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 2013; Oliveira & Souza, 2017). Gender and age have been the primary identities of studies on child-freeness (see Allen & Wiles, 2013; Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Bays, 2017; Colledge & Runacres, 2023; DeLyser 2012; França, 2022; Kelly, 2009; Verniers, 2020, Wilkinson & Rouse, 2023). The intersection of gender and age with other social identities, such as race and social class, has not been a primary focus (Engwall, 2014). Intersectionality has traditionally been underutilised in organisational studies, but recent years have seen a growing emphasis on exploring it within workplace contexts (Castro & Holvino, 2016; Holvino, 2010; Luiz & Terziev, 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Rosette et al., 2018).

Black women are subject to greater inequalities such as discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping, and lack of opportunities and resources in the workplace due to the intersection of their race and gender (Castro & Holvino, 2016; Luiz & Terziev, 2022; Rosette et al., 2018). Despite occupying these multiple stigmatised, marginalised, and interlocking social identities (Raman, 2020; Ryan & Briggs, 2019), international research has suggested that black women often need to shift or conceal their identities in the workplace (Holvino, 2010; Rosette et al., 2018). Researchers Wilkinson et al. (2017) have expressed for child-freeness in the workplace to be understood through an intersectional lens, recognising the multiple social identities that women hold and how they interact to shape their experiences of being child-free is key.

Perceptions of child-freeness: Research patterns in the global North and South

In this section, a review of local and international studies using quantitative and qualitative methods is discussed, to explore how workers who identify as child-free are perceived in society. Emerging studies have indicated that globally, more women are foregoing motherhood (Bongaarts, 2015; Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017; Miettinen et al., 2015); yet societal responses differ across cultural contexts and according to identity markers such as social class, age, race and gender (De Wet-Billings et al., 2021; Masebe & Ramosebudi, 2015; Okpan & Otega, 2021; Vinson et al., 2010).

Social class. SES influences trends in child-freeness. In South Africa, there is a growing trend of delayed parenthood in urban areas and among higher socio-economic classes (Biney et al., 2021; De Wet-Billings et al., 2021). Differences in fertility patterns also vary by level of education, employment status, and household wealth with fertility decreasing with increased education (Biney et al., 2021). Higher education levels and professional careers often correlate with more progressive views on family and reproduction (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017). Individuals with higher SES may have greater access to resources and support networks that enable a broader acceptance of diverse life choices, including the decision to remain child-free (Umberson et al., 2010). In South Africa, Masebe and Ramosebudi (2016) found that women with bachelor's degrees and higher education levels had greater levels of child-freeness.

Research has shown that academics in Western nations are more likely than employees in any other sector to be child-free and that this difference is especially noticeable among female scholars (Beaujouan et al., 2015; Berghammer et al., 2016; Neyer et al., 2017; Stiģe-Škuškovnika, 2022). Berghammer et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative study on child-freeness intentions amongst 196 female Austrian researchers aged 25 to 45. The findings suggest that over 90% of the sample intended to have children at some point. More than other highly educated women, it was found that female researchers strongly shifted childbearing to later reproductive ages. Delays in childbearing were linked to work-related factors, career-focused priorities, and partnership context. This trend of postponement of parenthood is increasingly becoming a norm among educated and financially stable South African women, reflecting a shift towards prioritising personal and professional development (De Wet-Billings et al., 2021; Masebe & Ramosebudi, 2015). Research also suggests that perceptions of child-freeness are shaped by age and race, as noted in the next sub-sections.

Age. Literature reveals that perceptions of child-free individuals often change with age, reflecting societal expectations tied to life stages. In their study, Ngoubene-Atioky et al.

(2017) utilised a vignette-based experimental design featuring 65 psychotherapists with diverse clinical experiences.The study aimed to explore whether therapists' ability to empathise varied depending on the intersecting SES and age of a child-free woman. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 69 years old. Findings revealed that psychotherapists demonstrated varying levels of empathy for child-free women based on their age and SES. Younger, economically stable, child-free women often received less empathy. In contrast, older women or those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds elicited greater empathy.

Research finds that younger child-free women are viewed more favourably as they are seen to be prioritising career or personal freedom, which is often perceived as temporary or experimental (Park, 2005). However, as they age, particularly past the socially normative childbearing years, child-free individuals, especially women, are more likely to face stigmatisation or be labelled as selfish, deviant, or unnatural for not fulfilling the traditional roles of parenthood (Giles et al., 2009). Older child-free individuals also face perceptions that they will regret their decision later in life (see Hintz, 2022; Neal & Neal, 2023). The findings of both DeLyser's (2012) and Allen and Wiles's (2013) studies challenge cultural assumptions and stigma, instead highlighting the positive experiences of older individuals who are child-free, emphasising their fulfilment and life satisfaction, and countering stereotypes of regret.

Race. The majority of discourse surrounding child-freeness has centered around white individuals. Media representations have further tended to reinforce this trend. For example, Hadfield et al's. (2007) study conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) analysed how the media portrays motherhood and the concept of choice, revealing that childless women are predominantly depicted as white, middle-class professionals. These women are often framed as victims of societal pressures and career demands, positioning them as deserving of support (Hadfield et al., 2007). This reflects Settle and Brumley's (2014) assertion that white women occupy a privileged position in society and the choice to be child-free is a reflection of that privilege.

As a result of these factors, the narratives of child-free black women have been sidelined in both academic discourse and societal representations, perpetuating a narrow, predominantly white-centric understanding of child-freeness. Two quantitative studies in sociology and social psychology have examined observers' attitudes toward child-free women as a function of their race. In their experimental design with students in the US, Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell (2007a) used vignettes that depicted married, child-free couples that were either black or white. The findings revealed no significant effect of race on participants' attitudes toward child-free women. In contrast, Vinson et al. (2010) expanded this framework

by incorporating both motherhood status and ethnicity into their vignettes. Their results showed that Black American mothers were rated more positively than child-free Black American women. Thus, race affects how child-free individuals are perceived in society. Similarly to race, gender and child-freeness have been portrayed through narrow and stereotypical lenses.

Gender. In terms of gender, the discourse surrounding child-freeness has largely been centred around women's experiences in the global North. Numerous studies have delved into societal attitudes toward women's decisions to remain child-free (Bays, 2017; Hintz & Tucker, 2023; Kelly, 2009; Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018). This focus is informed by pro-nationalist assumptions that equate womanhood and femininity with motherhood (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Gillespie, 2003), underscoring the gendered nature of reproductive expectations. For example, Hintz and Haywood (2021) conducted a mixed methods media frame analysis to determine how voluntarily child-free individuals are framed in US. news coverage, specifically related to demographic shifts, policy issues, and broader cultural and social narratives. The study's findings revealed gender disparities in US news coverage of child-freeness, with child-free men being approximately half as likely as child-free women to appear in such narratives, and childless men being four times less likely than their female counterparts to feature in discussions of voluntary childlessness. These disparities perpetuate the misconception that voluntary childlessness and infertility are issues predominantly concerning heterosexual cisgender women (Hintz & Haywood, 2021). This trend underscores the pervasive influence of pronatalist ideologies in shaping societal expectations around gender roles, particularly the association of childbearing with femininity.

A study conducted by Colledge and Runacres (2023) also found that societal expectations around child-bearing affect how child-free women are perceived. Through semi-structured interviews with women between 23 and 38 in the UK, the study revealed that millennials expect women to conform to socially constructed gender norms and to desire children as prescribed by their gender. While participants expressed positive external attitudes toward voluntarily child-free women, the data revealed underlying biases and internal prejudices. In contrast, Park (2002) found that stigma and negative perceptions were more pronounced for child-free women than men while Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell (2007b) found that men report greater negative perceptions of voluntary childlessness than women; yet most of the discourse focuses on women. For instance, in their quantitative study conducted with 299 college students between the ages of 18 and 50 in the US amongst a predominantly female (70.9 %, n = 212), heterosexual (87.0 %, n = 260), Christian (50.5 %, n = 151) and white (45.2 %, n = 135) sample, Bays (2017) found that women with children were generally perceived as

warmer than their child-free counterparts, with involuntarily childless women viewed more favourably than voluntarily child-free women. Specifically, involuntarily childless women elicited pity, while voluntarily child-free women were more likely to provoke envy, disgust, and harmful behaviours.

Research by Chancey and Dumais (2009) affirms this as involuntarily childless are often pitied for their circumstances, whilst child-free individuals are perceived negatively in society, suggesting that "it is not only the process of raising children that makes one socially desirable, but one's orientation toward the process of raising children" (Chancey & Dumais 2009, p. 208). Similarly, Ashburn-Nardo (2017) supported these findings, revealing that voluntarily child-free individuals are often met with moral outrage, anger, disgust, and disapproval. They are also perceived as being less psychologically fulfilled compared to parents, highlighting the persistent stigmatisation of those who choose not to have children.

Thus, while perceptions of child-freeness globally are influenced by gender, race, age and SES, the unique socio-cultural and economic context of the global South amplifies these challenges, particularly in the workplace, as reviewed in the following section.

Navigating intersectionality: Black women's identities in the global South workplace

This section reviews literature emerging from the global South with South Africa as a global Southern context, exploring how black women experience the workplace at the intersection of their race, gender, and social class identities. The experiences of black women in post-apartheid South Africa mirror the invisibility and discrimination encountered by African black women in the United States (e.g., Dickens et al., 2018; Dow et al., 2015). In exploring the intersection of race and gender, it becomes evident that black women in managerial roles face unique oppression. Those holding these identities often struggle due to the expectations that align with a dominant, white masculine perspective. For instance, a study by (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016) revealed that women in managerial positions were frequently expected to exhibit specific behaviours that mirrored those of white males, reinforcing the notion that leadership was predominantly the domain of white men. This dynamic underscores how the intersection of race and gender complicates the experiences of black women,

Scholars have noted how black women experience racial discrimination in their workplace and encounter the 'glass ceiling', an obstacle that affects many black women (Bloch et al., 2021; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Matotoka & Odeku, 2021b). They face elevated poverty rates earning disproportionality less than their white female counterparts and black male counterparts (Mandel & Semyonov, 2016). The overlapping oppressions black women

face contribute to a unique form of marginalisation that exacerbates their struggles for equality in pay, promotions, and workplace recognition. In the global South, black women are frequently marginalised in the labour market, often confined to lower-paying and less secure jobs (Ackermann & Velelo, 2015; Gradín, 2021). In South Africa, research findings suggest that affirmative action measures have had minimal influence, as white males still have a dominant presence in highly skilled professions, and racial wage disparities remain higher than they were in 1997 (Mayer et al., 2019). Thus, the minimal progress of affirmative action perpetuates structural inequalities, reinforcing the glass ceiling and creating barriers for black women to access leadership roles or highly skilled positions. Furthermore, the wage gap between racial groups continues to place black women at an economic disadvantage, limiting their financial independence and long-term career prospects.

Racial and gender discrimination has a long history in South Africa (Moyo, 2022). The Employment Equity Act (EEA) and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) are two legislative frameworks that were implemented to address the inequalities of apartheid by promoting economic participation and ownership for black South Africans. However, in their study, Matotoka and Odeku (2021a) found that skilled professionals did not believe that black employees were fit to be in skilled jobs. Similarly, a qualitative multiple case study research study was conducted by Mayer et al. (2019) to understand the experiences of EEA and comprised of 79 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews within South African public and private organisations. The study sample included employees from 11 organisations of different social-cultural, racial, and gender backgrounds. The findings revealed that black employees encounter being stereotyped as ‘racial quotas’ who were only appointed due to their racial background. As a result of this, they were often discriminated against being labelled as ‘incompetent’ and ‘unskilled’ exacerbating feelings of marginalisation. Additionally, many participants felt that there was a lack of training and development further limiting their career growth and progression, perpetuating cycles of inequality, and hindering their ability to advance into leadership roles. Through a qualitative study Moyo (2022) found among their sample of seven black South African women between the ages of 24 and 39 who worked in white-collar jobs that black women faced gender and racial bias and discrimination in the workplace. They faced excessive monitoring and scrutiny compared to their white counterparts, and marginalisation where they were left out of critical workplace conversations and decisions. This systemic discrimination stifles both personal and professional development, reinforcing racial divides in the workplace and deepening socio-economic disparities in post-apartheid South Africa.

A study conducted by Jaga et al. (2018) found similar discriminatory practices. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 19 African black mothers who had completed their tertiary education and were employed in professional occupations. The findings of the study revealed that women received less pay than men and were treated inferiorly, being undervalued and undermined in terms of their skills and expertise. Furthermore, even with BEE policies, organisational structures were not transformed and continued to perpetuate racial inequalities. These policies, though aimed at addressing historical imbalances, typically fall short in practice, leading to superficial compliance rather than meaningful change (Jaga et al., 2018). Studies have detailed how black women, both locally and internationally, are subjected to stigmatisation and objectification as marginalised identities (Mayer, 2017). South African workplaces foster the development of tense and conflicting identities that are primarily influenced by racial group affiliation rather than individualised and personal traits (Mayer et al., 2019). Thus, demonstrating that societal attitudes towards gender and racial groups still exist and prevail in workspaces. The same holds true for child-free women as discussed in the following section.

Child-free women in the workplace

The workplace is a critical environment for understanding the experiences of child-free women as it influences their careers, well-being, and social identity. For child-free individuals, the workplace often serves as a primary arena where societal norms and expectations regarding family and reproduction are reinforced or challenged. Individuals who do not fit socio-cultural norms are overtly and covertly discriminated against and stigmatised (Hadley, 2024).

International research has shown how child-free women are subject to many stereotypes and biased organisational policies in the workplace that affect their work-life experiences (Hintz & Tucker, 2023). Child-free women who do not conform to traditional family ideals (e.g., LGBTQ+, unmarried, child-free, and single parents) may be subject to stigmatisation, discrimination, and marginalisation (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014; Rick & Meisenbach, 2017). For example, Dixon and Dougherty's (2014) qualitative study, conducted in the US with 60 participants between the ages of 19 and 65 years old, found that single, LGBTQ and childless participants were 'othered' in workplaces that tend to favour traditional family models over non-nuclear families. Through interviews, it was revealed that when childless individuals do gain visibility, they are frequently treated as an anomaly, subjected to scrutiny, and faced with questions or criticism from colleagues about their lifestyle choices (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). Likewise, Rick and Meisenbach (2017) when conducted interviews with seven women and

three men between the ages of 32 and 67 who identify as voluntarily child-free, similarly found that child-free individuals face stigmatisation due to societal and workplace expectations that prioritise family-oriented norms. The study identified that such stigmas led to challenges in achieving WLB, as child-free employees often encountered assumptions that they are more available for work or lack legitimate personal obligations compared to their counterparts with children. Due to being stigmatised, it was revealed that child-free women go above and beyond what is required of them. Therefore, international research speaks to how child-free women are stigmatised, discriminated against and marginalised in workplaces; some research has begun to engage further with how child-free women are positioned as ideal workers.

Child-free women as the 'ideal worker'. Child-free women are perceived as being the 'ideal worker' (França, 2022; Utoft, 2020) as there is an assumed centrality of work in their lives (Chung et al., 2022). Acker (1990) argued that the concept of the 'ideal worker' is built upon assumptions of an unencumbered worker who is fully available to meet the demands of the workplace without the interruptions or constraints of caregiving responsibilities. According to Verniers (2020), women who prioritise their work over their personal lives may receive a bonus because they are perceived as "ideal workers". In most capitalist countries these ideal worker norms establish expectations of prioritising work, a problem that tends to affect child-free individuals (Utoft, 2020; Williams & Multhaup, 2018). Given the expectations surrounding the 'ideal worker' as a result, the child-free workers non-work-related activities such as self-care, and leisure prove to be challenging (Filippi et al., 2024; França, 2022; Wilkinson et al., 2017).

The positioning of child-free women as ideal workers has implications for child-free women's health. This idealisation can lead to expectations of constant availability and increased workload, which may contribute to burnout and work-life imbalance (Coron & Garbe, 2023). Additionally, the pressure to conform to the ideal worker norm can negatively impact their psychological well-being, as they may feel undervalued or alienated if their personal choices are not aligned with workplace expectations (Tanquerel & Santistevan, 2022). Although child-free, there are many other issues this demographic could be facing that organisations are unaware of, such as reproductive health issues. Many women do not feel comfortable discussing these topics in the workplace (Brassart Olsen, 2023; Grandey et al., 2020; Sang et al., 2021), and thus, risk being the 'ideal worker' at the expense of their well-being (Gatrell, 2011). The inability of organisations to recognise the needs of child-free women can ultimately reinforce work–life conflict and further marginalise those who do not conform.

WLB challenges. WLB challenges for child-free women are often overlooked due to

the assumption that they have fewer personal responsibilities compared to their counterparts with children. However, child-free women face unique barriers in combining their professional and personal lives. In their study, Filippi et al. (2024) explored the attribution of deservingness of WLB arrangements for voluntarily childfree employees compared to employees with children using an experimental design. A total of 411 respondents of an average age of 35 participated in the survey (278 Italian and 133 Dutch). Female employees with children were given greater priority for WLB arrangements than child-free women, particularly in Italy, where societal norms strongly tie womanhood to motherhood. This bias was not observed among Dutch respondents, where there is a broader acceptance of voluntary childlessness. Similarly, a mixed-methods study comprising of 185 participants (15% male, 84% female, 1% unknown) was conducted to explore how different family types perceive the inclusiveness of WLB policies (Blight et al., 2022). The sample included employees within various organisational settings and individuals from three categories of family types: (1) employees with children, (2) partnered/childfree employees, (3) single/childfree employees. Child-free employees reported feeling excluded from WLB policies. They perceived significantly less equitable access to benefits, higher and unequal work expectations, and less respect for their nonwork roles compared to their colleagues with children. This highlights a disparity in how WLB policies are experienced, suggesting that child-free employees may face implicit biases or structural barriers that undermine their ability to balance work and personal life reflecting broader societal norms that prioritise parenthood over other forms of WLB.

Despite assumptions regarding child-free workers' personal lives, many child-free individuals have other personal responsibilities such as family caregiving. For example, a qualitative study conducted in the US explored the work-life issues single child-free individuals face (Casper & Swanberg, 2009). The sample included 24 women and 13 men, aged 25 to 29 in various occupations, who were single, child-free and in full-time employment. The findings revealed that participants faced challenges in the workplace including differential treatment in terms of expectations to work, stigmatisation due to their single identity, and a lack of support for their nonwork responsibilities which involved caring for others. Many of the participants were caring for others (providing both instrumental care and financial support) such as eldercare which was found to be a contributing factor to their work-life Child-free workers often perceive that WLB practices are primarily designed for employees with children, which can lead to a sense of inequality and discrimination at work (Blight et al., 2022). Thus, the findings of these studies suggest that societal perceptions of being child-free shape WLB arrangements. While the workplace often marginalises child-free women due to availability

assumptions and fewer obligations, these stereotypes are further complicated when women engage in reproductive interventions; some research has begun to explore these tensions.

Intersecting tensions: Child-free women's reproductive realities at work

Women face numerous challenges in the workplace that are structured around male bodies, with organisational cultures reinforcing gendered norms that exclude women and view their needs as disruptive (Acker, 1990). The body, particularly women's bodily functions such as menstruation, pregnancy, and fertility, is often seen as incompatible with professional expectations, highlighting the gender bias embedded in organisational structures (Grandey et al., 2020). These gendered norms continue to persist, making it difficult for women to fully integrate into workspaces that are not designed with their needs in mind.

Despite advancements in gender equality in the workplace, the voices of marginalised groups such as child-free women remain sidelined. Child-free women experience health issues in the workplace that are deeply connected to their identity and reproductive body, yet many work environments do not support their reproductive needs (Acker, 1990; Cervi & Brewis, 2022). Although previous literature in this field has predominantly focused on mothers' challenges in the workplace, including that of pregnancy and breastfeeding (e.g., Gatrell, 2013; Vilar-Compte et., 2021), little attention has been given to the reproductive challenges of child-free workers, including menstruation, and fertility treatment. This underscores the inadequacy of organisational structures to support the reproductive needs of child-free women.

Research from the global North highlights the lack of understanding and support from employers regarding the physical and emotional toll of fertility treatments, leading to increased stress and conflicts between work and personal life (Domar et al., 2012; Payne et al., 2019). Women tend to conceal their reproductive challenges in the workplace due to a lack of understanding and acceptance. As a result, organisations may lack awareness of the unique challenges faced by child-free women, whose identities of 'women' and 'child-free' intersect with broader gender norms and societal expectations, creating unique complexities. For instance, a quantitative study conducted by Payne et al. (2015) looked at experiences and psychological challenges faced by individuals balancing fertility treatments with their work commitments with the sample consisting of 63 women based in the UK. The findings suggest that women experience bi-directional conflict where the domains of their fertility treatment and work face conflict in both directions. The time and demands of fertility treatment negatively impacted their ability to fulfil their work roles. Subsequently, the demands, pressures, and responsibilities of work interfere with the emotional, physical and psychological demands of

fertility treatment.

The majority of the research surrounding fertility treatments has been centred around the global North, with predominantly white, older, middle-class, educated, professional individuals in cohabiting relationships (Datta et al., 2016), which does not accurately reflect the diverse and often more complex realities faced by people in the global South, particularly in South Africa. As Acker (1990) notes, gendered organisations are also racialised and classed. Thus, in the South African context where workplace factors are heavily influenced by the intersectionality of race, gender, and SES, child-free black women's experiences in combining fertility treatments with work are likely to be more contextually complex. Understanding the workplace challenges of child-free black women cannot be understood without acknowledging the broader socio-cultural and historical constructs surrounding motherhood and reproduction. These constructs perpetuate stereotypes that marginalise women who deviate from traditional reproductive norms. This will be discussed further in the following section.

Indigenous meanings of motherhood, reproduction, and child-freeness

In the South African context, scholars have noted how black women experience pressure to bear children as a result of socio-cultural norms (Baloyi, 2017; Maponya, 2021). According to Baloyi (2017) and Maponya (2021), motherhood is often perceived as a central expression of femininity and definitive of women's 'reputation', identities, and how they are expected to fulfil these roles. Central to motherhood are the concepts of fertility and procreation which are considered essential aspects of family continuity, individual identity, and societal unity (Church et al., 2023). In many African cultures, women with children are afforded greater respect and perceived as more responsible compared to women who do not have children (Naab, 2014). For instance, women with children are addressed by the names of their children indicating a strong tie between individual identity and motherhood (Naab, 2014). These socio-cultural norms attached to motherhood in some African cultures may therefore imply that the act of having children is not only a personal aspiration but also a crucial role obligation and a family responsibility.

Van Breda and Pinkerton (2019) have additionally shown how traditional norms of motherhood can be understood through the clan or kinship networks that characterise many African households. Within clan and kin networks, there is a strong emphasis on familial bonds, communal support systems, and the perpetuation of cultural traditions and values, reinforcing women's roles in these spheres (Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2019). Thus, unlike Northern countries that follow individualistic cultures where exercising agency is culturally valued (Metz, 2017;

Okpan & Otega, 2021), African cultural systems are argued to emphasise the collective over the individual, prioritising communal goals and familial duties (Metz, 2017; Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2019). The collective nature of these societies means that the decisions and behaviours of individuals are often guided by the expectations and norms of the broader community and family unit (Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2019).

Children are also seen as a source of power and pride for parents (Chimbatata & Malimba, 2016; Kuug et al., 2023). In some instances, children in Africa are also considered a form of fulfilment, source of labour, and financial security for parents in their old age (Chimbatata & Malimba, 2016; Dyer, 2007; Karimi et al., 2015; Kuug et al., 2023; Maponya, 2021). Childbearing also assures family continuity (Chimbatata & Malimba, 2016; Kuug et al., 2023; Maponya, 2021; Tabong & Adongo, 2013) meaning that the prominence and depth of pronatalist ideologies remain strong in African communities (Dyer, 2007).

Given the centrality of reproduction and motherhood to these indigenous belief systems, child-free individuals who form part of these cultural groups may experience tensions in embracing their child-free status as it can be viewed as contradicting the cultural role of upholding family continuity and communal contribution (Baloyi, 2017). In many African cultures, those who remain child-free, whether by choice or circumstance, face social consequences. They may be viewed as failures or incomplete within their communities, leading to social exclusion and reduced opportunities (Chimbatata & Malimba, 2016). The child-free choice is likely to be met with misunderstanding, judgment and ostracism, potentially affecting child-free women's personal and professional relationships. These women may experience a lack of support and validation both within their families and communities, as well as in the workplace, where their decision might be viewed as contrary to traditional roles and responsibilities. These societal attitudes can be regarded as a source of stress, guilt, and a sense of failure for child-free women (Diko, 2024; Okpan & Otega, 2021). Consequently, the pressure to conceive and meet cultural standards can take an emotional and psychological toll and lead to strain among child-free individuals (Diko, 2024). Given the cultural meanings attached to motherhood, African femininity, and reproduction, scholars such as Marutlulle (2020) have begun to engage in black women's experiences of child-freeness in the workplace guided by qualitative approaches, as reviewed in the next section.

Cultural norms and workplace realities: Black women's experiences of child-freeness

Within a local context, the experiences of child-free women are shaped by a combination of cultural, social, and organisational factors that influence their daily lives,

particularly in the workplace and in their communities. Marutlulle (2020) aimed to explore the erasure of black, child-free professional women and the exclusion they experience. This qualitative study was comprised of seven African child-free black women between the ages of 29 – 72 who were working professionals and resided in urban areas. The findings revealed that the South African workplace, as a microcosm of society, mirrored the larger social discourse on female normativity. Child-free women faced judgment and stereotyping for their reproductive choices, leading some to prefer working outside traditional organisational environments. Negative workplace experiences included feeling misunderstood, discrimination based on their reproductive choices, pressure to conform to group dynamics, pressure to work longer hours compared to colleagues without children and, assumptions regarding their maturity and competence based on their parental status. Marutlulle's (2020) early findings highlight the importance of understanding child-freeness in a Southern context such as South Africa where cultural expectations shape ideas around femininity, traditional role norms and reproduction.

Final notes

This chapter has explored child-freeness, and the associated intersectional complexities related to navigating this identity in the workplace. Literature reveals that perceptions of child-free individuals are shaped by gender, race, age, and SES, with child-free women facing stigma for deviating from pronatalist norms. This discrimination extends to the workplace, where child-free women are often perceived as having less need for WLB or flexibility compared to their parenting counterparts, leading to higher performance expectations and increased availability demands (Blight et al., 2022; Filippi et al., 2024; Verniers, 2020). This perception leads to increased expectations for availability and performance (Perrigino et al., 2018; Verniers, 2020), reflecting a deep-rooted prioritisation of work over personal life (Georgiadou & Damianidou, 2023). Literature reveals that there is typically little regard for child-free employees' personal lives and the issues they could be facing, such as fertility treatment or reproductive challenges. While the concept of child-freeness in organisational studies is relatively new and underexplored, this study aims to explore how child-free black women experience and manage their social identities as 'black', 'child-free' and 'female' in the workplace. Given that role theory is seldom considered with an intersectional lens, this exploration is both timely and necessary as social identities intersect to influence women's workplace experiences, particularly within the South African context, where enduring inequalities rooted in apartheid history continue to shape lived realities.

Chapter 3: Method

This chapter begins by providing a rationale for utilising a qualitative research approach to gain insight into the lived experiences of child-free black women in the South African workplace. Following this, it details the data collection method covering the sampling strategy, a description of the study participants and the measurement instrument used. Thereafter, the chapter outlines the procedure, as well as ethical considerations and the data analysis method. This chapter concludes with an overview of the rigorous methods employed to evaluate the quality and integrity of this qualitative research.

Research approach

This study made use of a qualitative approach to gain insight into the lived realities of black, child-free, South African working women. This approach was influenced by the researcher's interpretivist research philosophy. The interpretivist paradigm emphasises the need to understand social phenomena through the subjective experiences of study participants (Bourne et al., 2021). Furthermore, interpretivism allows for the interconnectedness of human experiences with the social realm to be understood (Bonache & Festing, 2020).

Within the interpretivist paradigm, the study drew on phenomenological and social constructivist theoretical foundations. Phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Lincoln et al., 2011). This lens was crucial for exploring the phenomenon of child-freeness in the workplace, as it allowed the research to pay special attention to how these experiences were felt, interpreted, and narrated by the participants. Social constructivism, which holds that knowledge and meaning are co-created through interaction within a cultural and social context (Phillips, 2023), was a crucial theoretical underpinning which assisted the researcher in understanding that participants' experiences are shaped not only by individual agency but also by broader social discourses, workplace norms, and cultural expectations surrounding gender and motherhood (Holvino, 2010). Together, the interpretivist epistemology and phenomenological and social constructivist ontological lenses helped the researcher ensure that participants' voices were meaningfully centred and contextually grounded

Employing a qualitative research method enabled the researcher to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of child-free women and the ways in which these experiences intersect with diverse, interconnected, and at times, dynamic social identities within professional settings (Bourne et al., 2021; Leedy et al., 2019). Lastly, as there is a paucity of studies on black child-free working women within the global South and South Africa more

specifically, a qualitative research approach was deemed most suitable. This qualitative approach provided the rich insights required when little is known about a research topic (Leedy et al., 2019).

Data collection

Sampling. Two non-probability sampling approaches were used, specifically the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling involves the researcher sampling participants who have experience or knowledge of the issues being addressed in the research (Oppong, 2013). As this study sought to explore a niche group of individuals, purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select an information-rich sample, that could provide an in-depth view of the research phenomena (Leedy et al., 2019). While purposive sampling can introduce researcher bias, as subjective judgment may result in unrepresentative or skewed samples (Sharma, 2017), the researcher mitigated this risk by carefully aligning the selection criteria with the study objectives and deliberately choosing participants. To ensure diversity in the study, participants were selected across a wide range of demographic characteristics, including race, age, SES, job level, and industry (see Table 2) (Bourne et al., 2021). The researcher recruited through various social media channels, including LinkedIn and WhatsApp as well as her personal network.

The snowball sampling method was used alongside purposive sampling as it allowed participants to recommend future participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Leedy et al., 2019). This strategy was advantageous in augmenting the sample size, as it allowed participants to validate the credibility of the study and serve as a testimonial for the researcher throughout the recruitment process of prospective participants (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). The present study sought to achieve a sample size of 15 by employing a combination of these two sampling approaches. According to Bernard (2013), there is an increasing consensus that a sample size of 10-20 key research participants is sufficient to uncover and understand the insights of individuals' lived experiences.

Data saturation and sufficiency occurred at interviews number 18 and 14 respectively. As the researcher had already committed to subsequent interviews with participants and thus proceeded with those interviews. However, the study was closed to any new participants. Data saturation refers to the point in qualitative research where no new information, themes, or insights emerge from the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2021) whilst data sufficiency refers to the point at which the data collected is considered to be adequate to fully address the research questions (LaDonna et al., 2021). From interviews 16 and 17, there was very little new

information that participants were providing however by interview 18 it was clear that no new information was emerging. Data sufficiency occurred slightly earlier at interview 14 as there was enough data to provide meaningful insights and offer novel contributions. All interviewees had provided comprehensive answers to each question and their varying experiences allowed for thorough analysis and meaningful comparisons during the data analysis process.

Study participants. The demographics of the participants can be viewed in Table 2 below (N = 22). The final study sample included 22 child-free black[1] women. Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 38. All participants were black, identifying as either African black (n = 13), coloured (n = 5) or Indian (n = 4). In terms of marital status, participants either identified as being single (n = 11), in a relationship (n = 7), or, married (n = 4). All participants identified as being voluntarily child-free (n = 6), temporarily child-free (n = 15), or involuntarily child-free (n = 1). Further, they all held 'white-collar jobs'[3] with occupations across a range of industries including human resources, mining, engineering, consulting, academia, and finance. Participants' work experience ranged from two years to 15 years.

Demographics table

Table 2

Participant information

Pseudonym	Race	Age	Martial status	Child-free status	Occupation	Working experience (years)	Highest level of education
Boitumelo	African Black	26	Single	Voluntarily child-free	Financial Officer	4	Honours degree
Priya	Indian	25	In a relationship	Temporarily child-free	Behavioural Economist Trainee	2	Master's degree
Natalia	Coloured	29	In a relationship	Temporarily child-free	Lecturer	6	Master's degree
Melissa	Coloured	31	In a relationship	Temporarily child-free	HR Manager	7	Honours degree
Anjali	Indian	26	In a relationship	Temporarily child-free	Management Consultant	4	Honours degree
Nomcebo	African Black	38	In a relationship	Temporarily child-free	Mining General Manager	15	Master's degree
Aliah	Coloured	30	Single	Voluntarily child-free	Senior Digital Producer	9	Bachelor's degree
Haseena	Indian	29	Single	Temporarily child-free	Operations Coordinator	9	Bachelor's degree
Karabo	African Black	33	Single	Temporarily child-free	Facility Agent	9	Master's degree
Taherah	Coloured	30	Married	Temporarily child-free	Administrative Research Assistant	4	Honours degree
Thabile	African Black	30	Single	Temporarily child-free	Investment Banker	6	Honours degree
Lindiwe	African Black	36	In a relationship	Involuntarily child-free	Academic	7	Doctoral degree
Raeesa	Indian	25	Married	Voluntarily child-free	Behavioural Therapist	2	Bachelor's degree

Pseudonym	Race	Age	Martial status	Child-free status	Occupation	Working experience (years)	Highest level of education
Zanele	African Black	32	Married	Temporarily child-free	Investment Banker	10	Honours degree
Lethabo	African Black	27	Single	Temporarily child-free	Senior Consultant	5	Honours degree
Bianca	Coloured	32	Married	Voluntarily child-free	Lecturer and Media Liaison	3	Master's degree
Refilwe	African Black	37	Single	Voluntarily child-free	Helpdesk Agent	12	Post school qualification
Kamogelo	African Black	24	In a relationship	Temporarily child-free	Recruiter	2	Honours degree
Palesa	African Black	34	Single	Temporarily child-free	People and Office Manager	7	Honours degree
Ayanda	African Black	26	Single	Voluntarily child-free	Global Partnerships Manager	4	Master's degree
Naledi	African Black	30	Single	Temporarily child-free	Monitoring and Evaluation Officer	5	Master's degree

Measuring instrument. The study made use of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were most appropriate for the data collection considering the researcher's goal to adequately understand the participant's unique perspective (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This interview structure allowed the researcher to gain a nuanced understanding of participants perspectives, experiences, and beliefs (McGrath et al., 2019). The semi-structured interview guide, which included a list of both open-ended and closed-ended questions (Adams, 2015), was followed by the researcher (see Appendix B). The interview guide consisted of contextual, core, and closing questions and was structured in a way that facilitated participants to share their experiences of being child-free in the workplace as well as their intersectional identities.

The contextual questions were open-ended and were asked to obtain some background information on the participants. This included questions such as "Can you start by telling me a bit about your job and what you do?" and "Can you tell me about your family and friends?". By starting with these questions, it was hoped that some rapport could be established between the researcher and the participant and that the participant would feel more at ease (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Following this, the interviews moved to core questions that were central to the topic, such as "Can you describe any pressure you have experienced from family, friends, or society regarding having children?" and "What are some of the challenges of being child-free in the workplace?". These open-ended questions created room for the researcher to delve deeper and pose more questions to gain better clarity of the topic (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). To do this the researcher used probes alongside the background and core questions such as "What helps to overcome these challenges?" and "How could your organisation support you better?". Probing proved effective in enabling both the interviewer and interviewee to delve deeper into specific topics and explore new ideas based on the flow of the conversation (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Following the core questions, the researcher used closing questions which were also open-ended to gather final thoughts about the topic. It also created space for participants to add anything they wished or to gain clarity. For example, closing questions included "Is there anything else you would like to add that will assist me in better understanding your experience of being child-free and how you navigate this identity both in your personal life and at work?" and "Do you have any questions for me?". The informal and conversational style of this interview format allowed the researcher and participant to establish a dialogue that was flexible and free-flowing allowing the researcher to gain rich insight into the topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

The semi-structured interview guide, with its nuanced and flexible design, enabled the researcher to adapt and refine the questions as the interviews progressed. As new and novel insights emerged during the interviews, the researcher incorporated additional questions into subsequent interviews. These added questions included: “Do you ever make use of your family responsibility leave?” and “how do you feel at the end of a workday?”

Data collection involved a blend of in-person and online interviews. Interviews took place between the 31st of May 2024 and the 26th of August 2024 and ranged between 40 and 120 minutes. Face-to-face interviews offered several advantages as they allowed the researcher to effectively interpret the interviewee’s non-verbal cues and social signals such as facial expressions and body posture (Irvine et al., 2013). This was important to consider as the contents of the interview contained potentially sensitive issues, such as work-life dynamics, racial challenges, and work/life dissatisfactions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Virtual interviews were used when there was a geographical distance between the researcher and the participant (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). These were conducted using Microsoft Teams for participants not located in Cape Town and for those who preferred a virtual interview for convenience (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Virtual interviews were also beneficial as they provided a calmer, more familiar, and private setting for participants and therefore also produced rich information (Johnson et al., 2021). However, the lack of physical presence in virtual interviews may result in participants feeling less connected, affecting the openness of their responses. The researcher avoided this by spending five minutes before each interview building rapport with participants by asking them about their day, their interest in participating in the study and assuring them about privacy and confidentiality. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in English (Jamshed, 2014). When a participant spoke in vernacular, the researcher used both Google Translate and consulted a native Xhosa speaker, someone they were familiar with, to assist with translation. This approach helped preserve cultural nuances such as tone and expression that might have been lost through Google Translate alone.

Procedure

Before commencing with the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) Faculty of Commerce Ethics in Research Committee (COM/00886/2024) (see Appendix C). A study infographic introducing the researcher, and the study was shared via personal networks and social media platforms including Linkedin and WhatsApp (see Appendix D). Once the researcher recruited potential participants who met the study’s eligibility criteria, they were sent a formal informed consent letter requesting their

permission to partake in this research study (see Appendix E).

The researcher abided by the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA 4 of 2013) by ensuring that all personal data collected from participants was handled with the highest standards of confidentiality and security through data anonymisation, secure data storage and restricted data access. Participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary and of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions (Babbie, 2013). Additionally, participants were also made aware that all data would be kept anonymous and confidential, as well as how their personal information would be used, stored, and shared. To ensure participants understood, this was emphasised in the consent form, the study infographic, the demographics questionnaire, and at the start of each interview. These measures ensured that the research complied fully with POPIA's legal and ethical guidelines, safeguarding the privacy and integrity of all participants involved.

Participants who consented to participate in the study were sent a demographic and background questionnaire via a Google Forms link to complete (refer to Appendix F). Once this had been filtered and it was confirmed that the participant met the requirements for the study, the researcher liaised with each participant to arrange a suitable date, time, and venue for the interview. All interviews were conducted individually to avoid the occurrence of groupthink, which commonly occurs in focus groups (Luke & Goodrich, 2019). Given the limited exploration of the topic, this approach was necessary to ensure that each participant's unique perspectives and experiences were fully captured without influence from others.

During the interview, the researcher followed the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A). At the end of each interview, the researcher engaged in reflexivity by reflecting on her assumptions, biases, emotional responses and performance during the interview process. This was put into a table with the following headings: 'trigger of reflexivity', 'thinking about my own thinking' and 'outcomes of reflexivity' (see Appendix G, Table 3). This approach allowed the researcher to critically assess how her perspectives might have influenced her interaction with participants, the flow of the interview, and the interpretation of data. This reflexive practice helped the researcher become more aware of how her personal perspectives and behaviour could shape not only the participant's experience but also the data collection process itself. By identifying these influences, the researcher could make informed adjustments (see Appendix G, Table 3) to improve her interviewing skills in subsequent interviews, fostering a more neutral and open environment for future participants and ensuring a more accurate and unbiased interpretation of the data. This iterative process of self-assessment

contributed to the rigour and depth of the research.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the historical and systemic injustices faced by black individuals –particularly women, the researcher anticipated that participants would possibly share personal experiences that were deeply meaningful and/or potentially distressing. Therefore, the researcher avoided imposing any harm by approaching the interviews with cultural sensitivity, humility, and reflexivity by allowing participants to freely express themselves in their native languages even though the researcher did not understand (e.g., interview with Kamogelo in which the participant spoke Xhosa at times). This decision was rooted in the researcher's commitment to honouring participant's identities and ensuring that they felt comfortable and respected during the interview. In this, the researcher avoided imposing any constraints on their self-expression, recognising that language is deeply tied to cultural identity and meaning-making (Hall et al., 2024). In the event that the interview created any feelings of discomfort, the researcher had appropriate referrals to assist participants.

The in-person interviews were recorded using a recording device and then transferred to Microsoft Word (Jamshed, 2014), and virtual interviews were recorded and transcribed on Microsoft Teams and Grain, a software platform used to transcribe virtual meetings. Any identifying information including names, contact details, and any other personal identifiers that could link participants to their responses were removed. Participants were allocated a pseudonym for the transcriptions of the audio recordings and the write-up of the dissertation. NVivo 14 was used to manage, store and analyse the qualitative interview data, as it creates a recovery file to back up all data stored on the programme (Izza & Rusydiana, 2022). Google Drive was used to store the data to ensure none was lost. In addition, data was securely stored on the researcher's password-protected laptop and secure communication channels such as encrypted email or password-protected platforms were used when sharing sensitive information with the researcher's supervisor and/or participants.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide to thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the qualitative data. Firstly, the researcher immersed themselves in the data by repeatedly going over the interview transcripts, making notes, and discussing emerging findings with her supervisor. The second step involved the researcher generating initial codes on NVivo14 systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial coding stage resulted in 245 codes. A few of the codes included in the final thematic framework included: "family expectations around childbearing", "child-free identity creates feelings of exclusion in the workplace",

"assumptions around availability" and "intersectional identity undermines women in the workplace" (see Appendix H for coding scheme/list). Although the researcher was familiar with the literature surrounding child-freeness in the workplace, novel codes emerged from the data analysis that were related to the challenges faced by child-free black women in the South African workplace such as "family responsibility leave gets forfeited as a child-free individual" and "workplace does not understand that family goes beyond nuclear ideals".

Following this, the researcher reviewed and refined the coding list resulting in 183 codes (see Appendix I, Table 5 for the final coding list). During this process, the researcher merged, expanded, and renamed codes to better reflect the research questions and emerging themes. For example, codes such as "fighting for work-life balance" and "difficulty in work-life balance" were combined into a single code named "difficulty in work-life balance". In addition, codes such as "being a woman is challenging" were expanded to include "being a woman of colour is challenging". This refinement was essential to ensure that the coding captured the intersectionality of participants' experiences, particularly concerning race, child-free status and gender. By specifying that the challenge was not only related to one social identity (i.e. gender) but also to another identity (i.e. race), the researcher ensured that the codes were more precise and aligned with the unique intersectional experiences and tensions shared by participants. Furthermore, this step was crucial to reflect the study's research questions, which sought to explore how multiple identity markers shape workplace experiences.

During step three, the researcher began to gather codes to capture as many themes and patterns as possible. Once these themes were identified, the researcher generated a 'thematic map' during step four and reviewed and refined the themes to ensure they captured information from the dataset as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006) (See Appendix J, Figures 1-3). In step five the researcher named and defined themes that accurately depicted the data: (1) The availability paradox: Navigating time and identity in child-free lives, (2) Redefining family at work: Child-free identities within organisational norms, (3) Unseen needs: Fostering inclusive spaces for child-free workers. (Refer to Appendix K, Table 6 for the list of themes that emerged via the thematic analysis). Lastly, in step six, the thematic analysis findings were written up to reflect the intersectional experiences of child-free black women in the South African workplace (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research rigour

To establish research rigour, the current study employed the four criteria presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985) namely, credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Additionally, the researcher engaged in reflexivity throughout all stages of the research undertaking from conceptualising the study to data analysis, by reflecting on her positionality as child-free black women and the experiences engaging with the dissertation. This was done by keeping a reflexive journal in which the researcher could critically reflect on her own assumptions, values, experiences, and biases that may have shaped the research process and findings (Billups, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Credibility. Credibility was established through member-checking. This process involved presenting the data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions to the participants to verify their accuracy and credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was ensured in several ways. Firstly, during the interview, the researcher paraphrased what the participant was saying to ensure they understood what the participant was communicating. Secondly, the researcher met with her supervisor weekly, where she was provided with support and guidance throughout the research process. Together, the researcher and supervisor co-coded 7 of the 22 transcripts to ensure consistency in the interpretation of data and to enhance the credibility of the coding process. Additionally, the supervisor and researcher worked closely to group the codes into meaningful categories. The extended collaboration between the researcher and supervisor helped to ensure the credibility of the data (Cypress, 2017). Additionally, before commencing with the research, the researcher presented the study to a panel of UCT Organisational Psychology academics, who provided valuable feedback and guidance on the study approach. Furthermore, the researcher sought advice from two qualitative researchers, one of whom is a key academic scholar who has conducted various studies on the experiences of child-free workers and the other, an experienced qualitative researcher who provided additional insights and guidance regarding the interview guide.

Dependability. Dependability involves describing the research process in sufficient detail so that it can be replicated by another researcher (Maher et al., 2018). To ensure this, the researcher kept a detailed audit trail, documenting all aspects of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation, to ensure transparency and accountability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, the research was internally assessed. The researcher's supervisor, a qualitative researcher who specialises in 'work-life' research, served as a second coder in the data analysis process, which allowed multiple researchers to independently analyse the data and compare their interpretations to ensure consistency and reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Additionally, the researcher conducted the first interview with her supervisor, in which the researcher was able to observe key interviewing techniques such as effective probing,

maintaining focus by avoiding compound questions and refining the phrasing of questions to be less direct while still eliciting meaningful responses.

Transferability. To achieve transferability, in which the study's findings can be transferred and utilised in other contexts, the current research provides thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the method chapter the researcher included comprehensive details allowing for the study to be undertaken in a variety of settings, under similar conditions, with similar participants among future researchers (Billups, 2021). The researcher clearly articulated the social, cultural, and historical context of the study ensuring that the findings are situated within a specific framework, allowing readers to evaluate their relevance to other contexts. Furthermore, by including direct quotations from participants, the study shows how themes were derived from the data and offers a tangible connection between findings and their sources.

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to the objectivity and neutrality of the research findings (Maher et al., 2018). To achieve confirmability, the researcher engaged in reflexivity. In so doing minimising investigator bias by acknowledging researcher predispositions (Maher et al., 2018). This practice ensured that the findings accurately reflected the experiences of the participants, rather than being influenced by the researcher's assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, the researcher actively solicited comments from her supervisor regarding the draft chapters. Consequently, this facilitated the critical evaluation of the researcher's interpretations and findings and uncovered hidden biases.

Reflexivity. Researchers such as Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) suggest that reflexivity be conducted at all stages of the research process. Thus, the following reflection outlines the researcher's reflexive thinking throughout the research process.

From the outset, I knew I wanted to pursue qualitative research to explore people's subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to their realities. My focus on work-life dynamics and marginalised workplace identities was solidified when my supervisor shared a Gender, Work and Organization special issue call for papers on being child-free at work. When reading this article, I immediately knew I wanted to conduct research on this topic. It felt as though the article was speaking directly to a lived reality that, until that moment, had been underexplored in both research and organisational discourse. When engaging further with the topic, I noticed the absence of ethnic minority women in the discourse surrounding child-freeness. This was also relayed by one of my participants during the interview, who stated, "I think it's an interesting study…it's something we take for granted. It's an under-studied area…the dynamics that we, as black females…experience navigating the workplace compared

to those with children…I think there's a gap to explore and understand all those lived experiences". (Kamogelo, 24, Recruiter). As an ethnic minority myself who is passionate about amplifying the voices of marginalised identities, I decided to centre my research on the lived experiences of child-free black women in the workplace.

For each interview, I documented my thoughts and experiences in a digital journal (see Appendix G, Table 3). Initially, I struggled with probing for information, often feeling as though I was intruding or prying into participants' personal lives. However, with each interview, I grew more comfortable with this process, realising that asking thoughtful follow-up questions was not only necessary but also a sign of genuine engagement with the participants' narratives. Familiarity with my interview guide also played a crucial role in this transformation. While I heavily relied on it during my first few interviews, by the time I reached the final ones, I found that I hardly needed it. This allowed the conversations to flow more naturally and enabled me to focus fully on active listening.

My second interview on the 7th of June 2024, was done in-person with a participant I was familiar with. At the end of the interview, I realised I had not been recording the whole time. This left me feeling a mix of frustration, embarrassment and disappointment. The interview had gone well, lasting over an hour in which the participant provided valuable insights and the thought of losing that data was disheartening. Thankfully, the participant was understanding and graciously agreed to re-do the interview at a later date. However, I could not help but worry that the organic flow and authenticity of their responses were not going to be fully recaptured in the second attempt. This experience served as a stark reminder of the importance of double-checking equipment before starting any session.

The remaining interviews took place soon after each other. Having six interviews in nine days took an emotional and physical toll on me. By the time I reached the last few interviews, I was exhausted, and this fatigue impacted my ability to remain fully present during the conversations. I found myself struggling to actively listen, and my performance in asking thoughtful, probing questions was not good. I felt as though I was not doing justice to myself, my participants and the research. I had underestimated how emotionally, and mentally taxing qualitative interviews could be and knew I needed to space out the remaining interviews. I did just that and spread the remaining 15 interviews over a two-month period. Although I slowly got the hang of conducting interviews as each interview passed, most interviews came with their own unique set of challenges. For instance, one participant conducted the interview while driving from home thus their camera was off. Not only did this prevent me from establishing

rapport with them and observing non-verbal cues but they were not fully present during the interview – I often had to repeat questions and received one-word answers. Furthermore, the connection was not great, which added another layer of complexity to the overall flow of the interview. Although I felt frustrated during the interview, upon reflection, I realised that my feelings were rooted in privilege. I had expectations of how interviews should unfold rather than adapting to the realities of participants' lives. Reflecting on this interview deepened my understanding of how the demands placed on child-free women often go unrecognised. It was a reminder of how qualitative research allows for these unexpected yet illuminating moments that bring data to life and offer richer insights. Reassessing these emotions helped me adopt a more empathetic perspective. The participant's choice to conduct the interview while driving highlighted the demands on their time and the competing priorities they navigate daily. It was a reminder that participants are generously sharing their time under circumstances that might not always be ideal for them. This scenario encouraged me to approach subsequent interviews with more openness and flexibility and to adapt to the needs and circumstances of my participants.

During the interview and data analysis process what became apparent to me was the notable difference between me and the participants. Although I also identify as a child-free black woman, I have no full-time working experience. Having not had prior working experience, I definitely felt intimidated leading up to the interviews. I was conscious of my limited exposure to professional environments and how that might affect my ability to connect with participants or fully understand their experiences. Compounding this was the fact that I was younger than most of the participants. While the age gap was only two – three years with some, it extended to as much as six – fourteen years with others. This disparity inevitably brought power dynamics into play, as I often felt that participants might view me as less credible or too inexperienced to engage meaningfully with their perspectives. During an interview, a participant tried to relate to me and asked how old I was and when I stated my age, she told me I probably had not experienced what she was referring to yet. Although I tried my best to hold space for participants, I could not help but feel that my age and inexperience were creating a barrier and preventing participants from opening up and feeling like they could be understood.

Upon reflection, while the intimidation I felt was valid, I am grateful for how it pushed me to grow and develop confidence in my ability to engage meaningfully across these age differences. As someone with a shared identity with many participants and who is about to

enter the world of work, I found listening to the experiences of my participants both enlightening and thought-provoking. Their stories offered a glimpse into the challenges and opportunities I might encounter in my own journey. It was empowering to recognise the resilience and strategies they employed to thrive in environments that were not always inclusive or accommodating. At the same time, it was sobering to learn about the systemic barriers and biases they faced. I am most grateful to these participants for entrusting me with their stories and experiences and hope that through my interpretation of my study findings, I accurately and respectfully represent their voices.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of black, female child-free professionals in the workplace. Further, this study explored how social roles and identity markers such as 'race', 'gender', and 'child-free' status intersected with paid employment to shape their lived realities. This chapter presents the three themes identified through analysis of the data: (1) The availability paradox: Navigating time and identity in child-free lives, (2) Redefining family at work: Child-free identities within organisational norms, (3) Unseen needs: Fostering inclusive spaces for child-free workers. Appendix J, Figure 4 illustrates the interconnection of themes.

The availability paradox: Navigating time and identity in child-free lives

Black child-free professional women encountered distinct discrimination in the South African workplace. The "availability paradox" describes how child-free black women were perceived in terms of their availability for work and personal commitments. Many women found that there was an underlying assumption around their availability, with managers typically assuming they did not have any family/caring responsibilities. As a result, they faced increased work demands and were afforded less autonomy and flexibility than their coworkers with children. This presumption influenced their professional identity, as they were stereotyped as more dedicated but, consequently, overworked simply because they were child-free.

One child-free woman described how her time and priorities are undervalued in the workplace:

> It's an…expectation that it (time) can be negotiated…if I compare it to somebody saying "I need to go home because my child is X", then it's like that is not open to negotiation. That's it done. End of discussion. Whereas with if I say "oh well…" it's seen as negotiable, even if it's something quite significant. (Bianca, 32, Lecturer and Media Liaison).

Bianca noted how her identity and time were perceived as negotiable in the workplace, in contrast to the time demands associated with parenthood, which were treated as non-negotiable and absolute. Her personal commitments, regardless of their significance, were subjected to scrutiny and potential compromise, whereas parental responsibilities were met with unquestioned acceptance. This discrepancy reflects an inequity in how time and identity are perceived and respected based on parental status. Another child-free woman goes on to describe assumptions around her availability by management:

> I've had conversations with some of my seniors who have quoted the fact that "Oh, but, Zanele, you don't have any kids. You don't have the same amount of pressure, so you can do XYZ". There was a time when a couple of people on my team quit in Nigeria, and there was no one covering there, and it was, like, almost a set. It was like, well, Zanele doesn't have any kids…we'll place her in Nigeria for six months with no consideration or care for, like, my actual personal life. (Zanele, 32, Investment Banker).

Zanele described how she was expected to relocate to a different country with minimal regard for her personal life. This decision was solely based on her not having any children and thus not holding any "pressure" or responsibilities. Her sentiments underscore the expectation that child-free women are typically relied upon to cover for their colleagues, frequently being the ones expected to step in and 'pick up the slack'. Another participant shared, "… what ends up happening is it's the same people who step in or step up because we don't have kids and the assumption is you have the time" (Natalia, 29, Lecturer). Literature has found that child-free employees face expectations to take on additional work due to the assumption that they have fewer personal or familial obligations hence, they are assumed to have more time for work (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2017). Moreover, there is an expectation for child-free employees to willingly put in longer hours, work odd schedules (including early mornings, late nights, weekends, or holidays), and take on extra responsibilities. Peterson and Engwall (2016) note that child-free women are often expected to 'fill in the gaps', leading to heavier workloads and social isolation from colleagues with different life roles.

Two child-free women shared expectations to step in for colleagues with children:

> I definitely…put up my hand more often than I should because I'm thinking that other people have more things to do than I would…which sometimes could even explain why there's so much on my plate. (Karabo, 33, Facility Agent).

> It's like, "Okay, that person's going to like the parent-teacher meeting. Do you mind filling for them? Because we [management] know you have your afternoon off". The other thing is, I don't have my afternoon off. I have, like, responsibilities. I have university. Sometimes I'm like, "Sure, I don't mind". Sometimes I'm like, "No, sorry,

> I can't"…it's always someone else having to pick up the work. (Raeesa, 25, Behavioural Therapist).

The experience of these child-free women highlights how assumptions around their availability become internalised, often leading to increased self-imposed workloads. Feeling that colleagues with children have greater demands, Karabo volunteers for additional responsibilities, often feeling the need to step in for others. On the other hand, Raeesa described being asked to cover for colleagues attending personal obligations, like a parent-teacher meeting, under the assumption that her time is less valuable. Thus, Karabo's voluntary actions stem from an internal sense of obligation, while Raeesa faces explicit external pressures. In both cases, the burden of these expectations highlights the organisational tendency to rely on certain employees, often child-free women, to take on additional workloads.

Role theory suggests individuals conform to perceived behavioural expectations within their roles (Biddle, 1986). The pressure to conform to this role of 'being available' was particularly intense for child-free black women in this study, where intersecting gender, racial, and child-free status resulted in expectations to take on additional work. Boitumelo, a 26-year-old, Financial Officer shared: "You can't say that on weekends 'I have plans', because 'What are your plans if you don't have kids?' People expect you to be working overtime.", reflecting that child-free workers should be readily available. Research shows that workplace policies often privilege parents, creating expectations for child-free employees to be more flexible with their time (Blight et al., 2022). This notion that personal plans are irrelevant for child-free workers implies that their time is less valuable, reinforcing a hierarchy of responsibility that privileges parenthood over other life choices. Peterson and Engwall (2016) discuss how voluntarily child-free individuals feel that their time and responsibilities are often misunderstood. In a society structured to support parents, child-free employees face assumptions that they have fewer legitimate time commitments, leading to expectations for them to cover extra shifts or remain more available. This dynamic contributes to feelings of unfairness as they receive fewer supports and accommodations despite having responsibilities and interests outside of work.

One child-free woman goes on to describe how these expectations make her feel:

> The main irritation for me is that…most people in my work environment who have children chose to have children in quite a 'free' way and part of me does feel like, well, you know, I didn't choose this (having children)…I also then chose to forgo some of the benefits of having children because I value my free time…But now my free time is being chewed up or… is expected as…a resource to support people who've made the choice to forgo that... sometimes it can make me feel resentful…in the moment, it definitely doesn't feel fair. (Bianca, 32, Lecturer and Media Liaison).

Bianca expresses frustration that her decision to remain child-free, which prioritises her free time, is overlooked and disregarded in the workplace. She values the autonomy and flexibility her child-free choice provides but feels this freedom is eroded as her time is treated as an expendable resource to support colleagues with children. Essentially, the benefit she consciously chose, maintaining control over her time, is undermined by the expectation to take on additional responsibilities, creating a sense of unfairness and frustration. Hadley's (2024) findings align with these sentiments revealing that parents are granted more flexibility, with the implicit assumption or expectation that child-free colleagues should take on additional responsibilities to cover for them. This dynamic highlights how workplace practices can disproportionately benefit parents at the expense of the time and autonomy of child-free employees causing child-free identities to be marginalised as further expressed by Boitumelo:

> They do make things for them [parents] that accommodate them… give them like, more attention…special attention. And with us [child-free women]…nobody really cares that much about us. We're just there to work and nothing else. Cause there's nothing else that we can do besides work. I think that's what they believe (Boitumelo, 26, Financial Officer).

Boitumelo's quote reflects the challenge of her child-free identity contributing to a sense of marginalisation. From an intersectional perspective, her statement reflects how gender and parental status interact to shape her workplace experience. The notion that "nobody really cares that much about us" underscores the invisibility and lack of support for child-free women compared to their counterparts with children who receive "special attention". Boitumelo went on to mention that "it does make me feel excluded". Despite being child-free and assumed to have no commitments, many women described having other responsibilities outside of work and feeling overlooked in work environments that often prioritise parental responsibilities:

> I don't have children, but I have other things to do…I'll either go to gym or I'll go to my pilates class or I'll see my parents, or I have plans with my husband, or I'll have university or a tutorial that I cannot miss. So, no, just because I don't have children doesn't mean that I am free, you know? (Raeesa, 25, Behavioural Therapist).

Here Raeesa notes that although she does not have children, it does not mean she is available. Role theory posits that social structures and norms impose specific behavioural expectations on individuals based on societal roles (Biddle, 1986). These prescribed roles for women in South African society can create role conflict when women pursue professional careers alongside other responsibilities, leading to increased stress and strain due to competing demands (Anglin et al., 2022; Creary & Gordon, 2016). Despite this, there is limited

understanding of the child-free identity in the workplace. Although these women do not have children, they have other responsibilities, as Raeesa shared. Yet to managers and organisations, before child-free women are seen as women, they are seen as child-free and thus the 'ideal worker'(Coron & Garbe, 2023). This ideal is often interpreted as prioritising work over personal life due to a perceived lack of responsibilities, creating conflicting demands between professional expectations and personal autonomy. However, child-free women do not just perform the role of a 'worker' as many managers and organisations assume; rather, they assume multiple roles in their daily lives, such as wives, daughters and friends (Biddle, 1986).

Two other child-free women discuss how their child-free identities were perceived by male colleagues as a departure from traditional norms of femininity, motherhood, and caregiving:

> I had a really big fight with my boss at the time during COVID because…I was the only woman in the team. And everyone else had stay-at-home, like partners…stay-at-home wives… the guys kind of took for granted that my husband works. I work as well for the most part. We do kind of split the chores, but there are certain things that some of the house duties end up falling a bit more on me. And the guys that I work with just couldn't quite comprehend because they live a very, very different life where all they have to do is just arrive at home, and it's like the kids lunch is already done and like there's dinner on the table. (Zanele, 32, Investment Banker).

> And they [male managers] are very much of. "Oh, no, but that's [homemaking] like a female's job and like, yes, that's [caring] a female's job". But, like, in this situation, you would be the female. And they don't really understand it… I do think the fact that they're males does play quite a big part in how they see you or understand things. (Haseena, 29, Operations Coordinator).

As working professionals and child-free women in largely male-dominated spaces, Zanele and Haseena drew attention to how their child-free identities departed from traditional notions of 'womanhood'. The participants shared how the institutional culture of their workplaces is shaped by patriarchal structures reinforcing traditional notions of gender and gendered labour in the home. In the absence of their identities as mothers, the women talk about how their male co-workers mark them as 'masculine' and as non-caregivers and resultantly 'available'; therefore, expecting the same lifestyle as their male colleague counterparts "where all they have to do is just arrive at home, and it's like the kids lunch is already done and like there's dinner on the table" as Zanele remarked. Traditional gender roles are particularly reinforced in the South African context where women have historically been designated as primary homemakers and caregivers, responsible for managing the household (Casale et al., 2021). While caregiving responsibilities are assumed for 'women', child-free women face the

added pressure of always being available for work due to a perceived lack of caregiving roles. Yet, the lived realities of child-free women such as Raeesa reveal the opposite:

> Every single day, I clean. I change bedding once a week. I don't even have a domestic. She comes like, twice a month…I can't say I'm getting a lot of help. And, I mean, I'm up early. He (husband) goes to work at 06:30 I'm up at five preparing lunch for him and making sure that there's food for him when he comes home and I'm not home. (Raeesa, 25, Behavioural Therapist).

Raeesa – who identifies as Muslim – remarks on how traditional gendered structures shape her home and personal life. Her identity as a wife and the gendered labour that comes with this position is noted in stark contrast with the masculinised, responsibility-free identity thrust upon child-free women in the workplace (Verniers, 2020). Further, her experience reflects the intersection of gender, religion, and child-free status, highlighting how traditional gender roles within certain cultural contexts persist, adding responsibilities to the lives of child-free black women. In many Muslim households, women bear the responsibility for domestic work, even when they are employed outside the home (Glas, 2022). Far from being a marker of oppression, these roles sometimes reflect a strong sense of duty and connection to one's religion and family values (Afsaruddin, 2023; Crossouard et al., 2020), yet this labour is often unpaid and undervalued, reinforcing traditional gender norms (Glas, 2022). Such responsibilities are not inherently negative but may become problematic when undervalued or unsupported by wider societal and workplace structures (Casper & Swanberg, 2009).

The mention of preparing meals and maintaining the household, often without substantial external support, underscores how cultural norms around gender labour remain deeply ingrained, even in the absence of children. This contradicts the stereotype that child-free workers have more free time, illustrating how intersectional identities, encompassing gender, religion, and child-free status, shape unique cultural complexities that often overlook obligations. Despite having other responsibilities outside of work, research finds that child-free employees are perceived as less deserving of WLB as they lack the 'family role' obligations that would warrant accommodations for personal time (Filippi et al., 2024). Raeesa's experience of navigating and negotiating her professional and personal gendered identities indicates the emotional and psychological labour expected of child-free black women.

Zanele states the difficulty she faced in balancing her roles:

> I'm… making up a lot for lost time. But, you know, on average I happen to speak to my sisters or…my parents for an hour, 2 hours sometimes in a week, like, in a hectic week. Yeah, it really crumbles like that. So, I mean, that is a big regret, and it is a big sacrifice that I end up making. (Zanele, 32, Investment Banker).

Zanele notes that her busy work schedule leaves her with as little as two hours a week to connect with close family members, revealing how her obligations are skewed towards the workplace, leaving little room to nurture personal relationships. In addition to being an employee, many women in the workplace occupy roles such as friends, daughters, partners, wives, and daughters-in-law (Akanji et al., 2020; Jaga & Guetterman, 2023). Zanele's "big regret" indicates a desire to nurture familial ties, a dynamic that is often overlooked in workplace policies that fail to recognise extended family structures. Furthermore, this experience illustrates the role strain she faces while navigating her identity as a committed professional and simultaneously the social pressure to maintain relationships (Creary & Gordon, 2016). This role conflict often stems from societal and workplace assumptions that those without children are unencumbered (Creary & Gordon, 2016; Verniers, 2020) which paradoxically assigns child-free women a role expectation of complete professional availability, pushing them to sacrifice personal relationships for work obligations.

Nomcebo goes on to share the benefits of being child-free but recognised it negatively influenced her relationships:

> And the only thing which was really to my advantage is that I didn't have kids…So it was easier for me to be available for the job…especially in the earlier years, as a shift supervisor, as a mine captain, and to a large extent as a mine manager, which is not a bad thing…But what it did mean is that obviously, certain relationships have suffered because I was busy and I would really get sucked into it sometimes. (Nomcebo, 38, Mining General Manager).

This child-free woman acknowledged that not having children afforded her the flexibility to commit fully to her career, especially in a high-responsibility masculine work environment. This did, however, come at a personal cost, as the intense job demands negatively impacted her relationships. Many participants found that their child-free status enabled them to embody the 'ideal worker' role, with high availability and commitment. Similarly, in their study, Turnbull et al. (2023) found that child-free individuals sacrifice discretionary aspects of life, such as socialising and well-being, to meet extreme work demands. Thus, child-free employees face disproportionate workplace burdens, which negatively affects their personal lives and overall well-being.

Additionally, Nomcebo's experience of sacrificing personal relationships aligns with role theory, which posits that social expectations attached to certain roles can create internal conflict when personal and professional domains clash (Creary & Gordon, 2016). According to Goode (1960), this strain arises from the need to fulfil incompatible expectations, a common challenge for child-free women who navigate the dual role of an ideal worker and an individual

with social and personal needs. In this instance, Nomcebo chose the role of a 'worker' over her role as a friend, daughter, sister, etc. as she felt it had better outcomes (i.e. career advancement), demonstrating role negotiation where child-free women must weigh the trade-offs between their roles and select the one that will most effectively serve their current goals (Biddle, 1986). Child-free black women embody the 'ideal worker' role and identity, constantly prioritising work over their personal lives, aligning with literature which indicates that the "ideal worker" model reinforces an unsustainable prioritisation of work over well-being (Chung et al., 2022; Filippi et al., 2024).

One child-free woman, Zanele, a 32-year-old, working as an Investment Banker described putting work ahead of her personal needs: "I remember even on my wedding day, I was working till the morning of my wedding. I think I slept like an hour or two leading up to…my wedding". Zanele's quote illustrates the extreme lengths she went to align herself with the 'ideal worker norm' characterised by total dedication to work at the expense of personal milestones. By working until the morning of her wedding, Zanele demonstrated a deep internalisation of this ideal, where professional commitment takes precedence over personal priorities, even during life-defining events (Acker, 1990). Her willingness to sacrifice rest and a personal milestone reflects the deeply entrenched workplace expectations that child-free individuals have fewer personal obligations and are, therefore, more available for demanding schedules. Zanele's prioritisation of work over her personal life can be understood as a response to the compounded challenges she faces as a black woman in a professional environment.

The racial biases surrounding black women in the workplace could account for her decisions: working extra hard, even at the expense of personal milestones, to combat perceptions of inadequacy or incompetence based on her race (Hall et al., 2012; Matotoka & Odeku, 2021a). The intersection of race and gender could have pushed Zanele to overcompensate, aligning with studies that found that black South African employees were perceived to be "unskilled" and "incompetent" for skilled job roles (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021a; Mayer et al., 2019). Literature suggests that black women in the workplace often face a unique set of challenges, including the need to constantly prove their competence and worth (Dickens et al., 2019), as noted in the extracts below:

> People who look like me don't usually do what I do…I wanted to prove to myself and the outside world… (as) there were challenges about whether I could do this job or not. (Nomcebo, 38, Mining General Manager).

> What really gripes me is the undermining…having to…first prove yourself that you're not here by mistake…you must first prove that you came in like everybody else…by applying, (sitting) in front of people, (having) a conversation, and they [management]

> decided that actually, you can fulfill this role based on (your expertise). And then once you've got your foot in the door…you now need to prove that actually I can do this…There's more to me than just the colour of my skin….people will judge you based on the colour of your skin. They just dismiss it as this person is incompetent…(Naledi, 30, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer).

Both Nomcebo and Naledi's quotes underscore the intersectionality of race and gender in shaping workplace experiences for child-free black women. Their emphasis on needing to "prove" themselves reveals a heightened pressure to continuously demonstrate competence, a burden often placed on individuals who belong to marginalised racial groups (Dickens et al., 2019). Naledi's statement that "there's more to me than just the colour of my skin" highlights how her racial identity is often foregrounded in professional evaluations, overshadowing her skills and contributions. This reveals the compounding effects of racial and gender biases, where societal stereotypes about black women, such as being less capable or less professional, intersect with workplace expectations. Research demonstrates that black women constantly need to defend their race, especially in predominantly white environments, leading to feelings of heightened scrutiny and the need to demonstrate not only proficiency but also a high level of competence to counteract stereotypes about their capabilities (Hall et al., 2012). This burden is compounded by the structural and cultural barriers that black women face in the South African workplace, as they are often marginalised or dismissed due to both racial and gender biases (Jaga et al., 2018; Moyo, 2022). These experiences create a work environment where black women must continuously assert their competence, compelling them to prove their worth constantly, often at the expense of their well-being and personal relationships.

One child-free woman described being given more work responsibilities because of her intersectional identity:

> I've had instances where my colleagues and my manager have tried to take their chances with giving me more responsibilities because, "Oh, Lindiwe, you have great interpersonal skills. You are a black, Zulu-speaking woman. This is a Zulu-speaking university, so you can do this". (Lindiwe, 36, Academic).

The experience of this child-free black woman underscores how racial, gendered, and cultural assumptions intersect to increase expectations and work demands. These intersecting identities typically position Lindiwe as hyper-visible within her workplace, where she is not only tasked with fulfilling her job duties but also navigating expectations to take on additional work due to her cultural background (Zulu-speaking). This expectation reinforces systemic inequities that capitalise on her gender, cultural and racial identity while downplaying the additional emotional and intellectual labour required to meet these demands. Such dynamics

are emblematic of tokenism, where representation is achieved without genuine inclusion. Mayer (2017) similarly found that black employees in the South African workplace experience 'tokenism' where they are included primarily to meet diversity targets rather than being genuinely empowered or supported in their roles. Holding multiple marginalised identities created pressure for child-free black women, with one participant noting, "I felt like a lot of work was being passed down to me. I didn't really understand until someone mentioned in passing that it's probably because of the colour of your skin, and only then did it click that, oh, shucks, I'm probably the black girl who's expected to work harder than everyone else…". (Lethabo, 27, Senior Consultant). In line with role theory, social roles based on identity markers impose expectations that often transcend job descriptions, creating role strain when individuals are expected to "fit" identity-based demands.

Research by Wingfield and Alston (2014) emphasises that Black women frequently face additional expectations to engage in "cultural congruity" labour to cater to their workplace's demographic needs, leading to an "identity tax" (i.e., extra work demands tied to their identity rather than their role). The expectation that Lindiwe should take on responsibilities due to her Zulu-speaking background and Lethabo due to her race places an undue "tax" on their identity. Both congruity and identity tax reinforce the idea that employees from minority groups are often seen through a narrow lens, where their value is tied more to their cultural or racial identity than to their professional qualifications or achievements. Campbell and Rodríguez (2019) argue that these expectations exacerbate workplace inequities, as black women are often expected to act as cultural intermediaries, resulting in unpaid, unrecognised labour that increases work strain. Furthermore, expectations of child-free women of colour compound the need to prove their commitment to work.

Zanele described needing to work more to counteract biases and demonstrate her competence:

> It's just kind of doing your best right. And kind of be undeniable…There's certain things, like when you produce outcomes, they [management] …they can't keep quiet about it…I think that's kind of been the, you know, the trick on my side is you kind of keep your head down. You volunteer, you do a little bit of extra work. (Zanele, 32, Investment Banker).

Zanele emphasises a strategy of being "undeniable" through exceeding expectations, drawing attention to how intersecting identities amplify the pressures faced by child-free black women to prove their professional worth and commitment. The intersectional identity held by this child-free woman forced her to internalise the role of the "ideal worker",

reinforcing the need to over-perform and put in extra time to demonstrate her worth. Lethabo, 27 years of age working as a Senior Consultant mentioned to managers that "I have a lot on my plate...I need extra hands…it was viewed as [me] not wanting to get the work done or not wanting to be a team player". Research shows that in the workplace, black women often face the expectation of completing tasks without any extra support, causing them to refrain from seeking aid to comply with the stereotype (Dow, 2015). These experiences reflect how compounded identity markers create added pressure to perform, demanding extra labour to navigate expectations and to prove legitimacy within their roles.

Khanyisa shared the racial and gendered discrimination she faced when requesting time off:

> I've had to say, "My dad is sick, I need to go home" or "My dad was in an accident, I have to go home and check if he's okay because I'm stressing"…I have to frame myself as someone who's going through difficult things in my personal life and need the support of the company before I'm allowed to do what my white counterpart is doing. This is very frustrating because now I'm helping them paint a picture of me that looks like someone who has too many distractions in their personal life to be considered as a good employee and an employee that you want to keep. Because by me saying no, there's stuff happening at home…It's me saying that I can't cope with life's difficulties. I need time or I need special concessions to be able to work. (Khanyisa, 28, Tax Consultant).

This woman's experience reflects the heightened scrutiny child-free black women face when requesting time off at work, revealing how racial and gendered dynamics influence work outcomes. This dynamic of fear, scrutiny and availability illustrates the internalised pressure for black women to present themselves as entirely work-focused to counteract assumptions of lower commitment, revealing role strain where personal roles conflict with perceived professional obligations (Biddle, 1986). Intersectionality extends our understanding of this challenge as individual roles intersect with racial and gendered biases in the workplace, creating a uniquely challenging environment for child-free black women, where personal responsibilities and professional perceptions are constantly at odds. Khanyisa's experience showcases how requests for flexibility can reinforce biases rather than reduce them. Black women, as Khanyisa illustrates, must navigate a delicate balance; they cannot request flexibility, such as time off for a family emergency, without risking being viewed as distracted or less reliable. Research suggests that black women often feel the need to work harder to counter stereotypes of lack of dedication (Williams, 2014). Known as the "prove-it-again" bias, black women must constantly validate their worth in ways their white counterparts do not (Williams et al., 2022). Khanyisa's fear of being labelled as "distracted" illustrates how such

stereotypes persist, forcing her to manage the impression she gives in ways her white peers may not face. This underscores the added labour black women perform to navigate workplace discrimination while maintaining professional credibility. Khanyisa goes on to add:

> When you don't [have time], it's kind of like "Why, why wouldn't you?" You're seen as lazy. Rather than prioritising your well-being, you're seen as not wanting your career to progress rather than prioritising your well-being…(it) can result in you being overlooked for opportunities …it's like, "No, you, you don't like staying late so we're [management] not going to put you on this project because if I need you (to) stay late, you won't". But the same doesn't apply to my male counterparts who are single and my age. For them, it's kind of, "Oh, if you want to take a break, yeah, sure, no problem. We trust that you'll get it done". But I don't get the same level of trust from my employer, especially when I have done nothing to prove otherwise. I haven't given you a reason to doubt my abilities and my commitment to my nine-to-five job. (Khanyisa, 28, Tax Consultant).

Khanyisa recounts the harmful stereotypes cast upon her as a black woman, noting how she endures triple oppression as a young, black woman where her child-free status, race, and gender intersect to maintain her marginalisation relative to her "male counterparts who are single and [her] age". For Khanyisa, her gender subjects her to traditional expectations that women should overcommit to prove their professional worth, often at the expense of personal boundaries. Simultaneously, her racial identity exposes her to stereotypes that black employees are less competent or committed, amplifying the pressure to overperform to gain trust and recognition. Her child-free identity as a woman exacerbates the challenge by positioning her as perpetually available, further limiting her ability to set boundaries without being perceived as less dedicated. She notes how the same standard of employee monitoring and "trust" is not applied to all equally and explains that her identity as a young black woman leaves her vulnerable to "doubt" by her employers. Stamarski and Son Hing (2015) similarly found that the gendered nature of organisational cultures and practices often leads to differential treatment with women in particular facing more scrutiny than men for prioritising personal well-being. However, in this instance, Khanyisa's intersectional identity exacerbates this role strain as she is required to navigate multiple, overlapping societal and workplace expectations.

Khanyisa's observation that she is seen as "lazy" or not career-focused when setting boundaries underscores how black women are often denied the opportunities to prioritise well-being without professional repercussions. Furthermore, such sentiments perpetuate negative stereotypes associated with blackness. European colonial narratives constructed the idea of Africans as inherently lazy, serving to justify exploitative colonial systems, including slavery and forced labour, and framed Africans as requiring European oversight to be productive

(Rönnbäck, 2014). Therefore, stereotypes about black individuals' supposed laziness continue to influence workplace evaluations, creating inequities. For child-free black women, these racial biases intersect with gendered biases where men are trusted to deliver regardless of their personal commitments. This inability to have the same freedom as her male peers reinforces systemic inequalities, forcing child-free black women like Khanyisa to overextend themselves to avoid being overlooked for advancement opportunities. In denying child-free black women the same flexibility and autonomy as male child-free workers, they are frequently put in the position of the "ideal worker" which perpetuates this disparity, creating a unique disadvantage for child-free black women in balancing well-being and professional goals (Acker, 1990).

Implicit biases around gender and child-free status converge to restrict child-free black women's access to career-advancing roles, framing their prioritisation of well-being as a flaw rather than a legitimate choice. For example, Raeesa shared how her comment about needing a holiday was not well received:

> My boss…made a comment. I was like, "Yeah, I need a holiday". So she's like, "Why?" So I was like, "No like, I just feel like I need a holiday". But I was talking to my colleague, and she's like, "Something wrong with your generation hey". And I was like, "What's that supposed to mean?" I asked her, and she was like, "No, it's just you people just always need breaks, and you always need time off". (Raeesa, 25, Behavioural Therapist).

This quote highlights the multifaceted challenges younger child-free women face in workplaces, where their age, gender, child-free and professional status intersect to make them vulnerable to dismissive attitudes and discrimination. The manager's dismissal of Raeesa's need for rest as a generational flaw aligns with findings that younger employees are often stereotyped as entitled or less resilient compared to older generations (Stanton, 2017). Millennials and Gen Z have grown up amid greater economic instability, precarious employment, and rising awareness of mental health issues (Twenge, 2017). These socio-economic realities have necessitated a shift in workplace values, emphasising WLB and well-being over the traditional "ideal worker" role that demands overwork and sacrifice (Williams et al., 2013), a value upheld by older generations. Raeesa's manager's comment can be seen as an attempt to reinforce traditional role expectations, while her response underscores resistance to these outdated norms. This assumption compounds the generational stereotype, framing child-free workers' desire for rest or WLB as unwarranted, further marginalising their experiences. This attitude can create an environment where younger child-free workers, particularly women, feel invalidated or undermined (Smith & Gayles, 2018).

Intersectionality further reveals how the manager's position as an older woman complicates this interaction. While shared gender might suggest solidarity, the manager's seniority and generational perspective enable her to perpetuate ageist and dismissive attitudes. Research indicates that women in leadership roles sometimes replicate patriarchal or hierarchical norms to maintain their authority in male-dominated workplaces, creating barriers for younger women (Derks et al., 2016). A South African study revealed that women in managerial positions were frequently expected to exhibit specific behaviours that mirrored those of white males (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). This expectation places women in a paradoxical position where they must conform to these norms to be seen as competent while navigating the double bind of marginalising other women in the workplace, perpetuating gender inequality and reinforcing the dominance of male-defined leadership norms. Further, it undermines solidarity among women by fostering competition rather than collaboration (Derks et al., 2016).

Like Raeesa, other participants desire personal time, rest and recovery:

> By the time the clock hits 17:00. I'm tired. I don't want to talk to anyone because I probably spent the whole day speaking to people at work. So I just want to eat, get into the shower, and go to bed. And I think it's always been a challenge because my friends are like, "Why can't you just call us during the day, answer a text, pick up the phone?" And I'm like, "Guys, I'm tired"…it's a challenge. (Lethabo, 27, Senior Consultant).

These sentiments shared by many participants reflect the tensions that Lethabo faces in combining work, personal time, and social relationships. She expressed a desire to recharge but felt guilty for having such needs. Her long workdays and lack of downtime leave her with limited opportunities for self-care, and even then, she felt conflicted about taking that time for herself. Similarly, Lethabo highlights the emotional and social exhaustion that comes from demanding workdays, leaving her with little energy for her friends. Her fatigue, coupled with the social pressures to stay connected, creates a tension between her work responsibilities and personal relationships. The guilt she faced about not responding to texts or social calls further illustrates the role strain experienced by many child-free women (Creary & Gordon, 2016).

The availability paradox in child-free black women's lives reflects the complex tension between time and identity. Organisations perceive them as having fewer responsibilities, leading to assumptions that their time is more expendable or less valuable, yet their experiences reveal that this was not the case. Participants drew attention to the time poverty they faced, where long working hours and high managerial/co-worker expectations left little room for self-care or maintaining meaningful relationships outside of work. The strain experienced by these child-free black women underscores the need for organisations to foster a more inclusive work

culture, moving away from ideal worker norms as they negotiate multiple intersecting tensions and demands.

Redefining family at work: Child-free identities within organisational norms

Child-free women were expected to navigate workplaces that are shaped around traditional family models. Despite not having children, these women were typically burdened with gendered and cultural expectations to provide care and support for extended family members, both financially and socially. In South Africa, these obligations are deeply rooted in cultural norms, where family responsibilities extend beyond the nuclear family structure to include extended kin networks. While organisations may promote a family-friendly culture, these benefits tend to privilege those with children, leaving child-free workers without tailored support or recognition despite holding caring roles in other ways (e.g., taking care of elderly family members or contributing to communal/ cultural care practices).

One child-free woman, Nomcebo a 38-year-old, working as a Mining General Manager mentioned being a provider for her family: “I feel like this [work] is one way that I contribute to…my family, because it’s allowed me to be able to help out at home, to put my siblings through school”. This indicates a deep sense of responsibility Nomcebo has in her role as a contributor to her family. By framing work as a means of fulfilling familial obligations, she connects her professional success to her ability to support her family’s well-being, particularly in enabling her siblings to access education. This underscores the cultural and social expectations placed on individuals in certain familial or community structures, to contribute financially to their households. Budlender and Lund (2011) found that South African non-parents frequently play roles in supporting siblings, extended family, or household needs. However, as this form of care work remains gendered and men often assume less responsibility for financial or other forms of support, women are compelled to balance the dual roles of caregiver and breadwinner (Budlender & Lund, 2011). This caregiving and provider role can be understood through the kinship networks that characterise many African households where there is a strong emphasis on familial bonds and communal support systems (Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2019). These cultural systems emphasise the collective over the individual, prioritising communal goals and familial duties, creating an expectation where many child-free black women are expected to fulfil the roles of caregiver and worker, while still putting their families above all else (Metz, 2017; Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2019).

Palesa shares the lack of understanding around dependents in the workplace:

> Companies tend to not understand what dependents actually entail…they always focus on your kid and your husband as dependents, and that's a massive gap…I've been supporting my family ever since I got my first job, so my child will be, like, a second…or…in addition to the others that I have. (Palesa, 34, People and Office Manager).

Palesa describes how financial responsibilities extend beyond the Western norm of "dependents" as only spouses and children. In African contexts, it is common to financially support parents, siblings, or extended family members, creating a financial burden similar to, or greater than, those with children (Evans et al., 2023). Literature on kinship support structures in African societies (Metz, 2017; Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2019) supports this, indicating that caregiving and financial obligations challenge the conventional workplace model of dependency support. Yet, organisations expect child-free women to rank work as their priority.

Anjali also shared being the breadwinner and caregiver in her family:

> I am…a caregiver for my mom, people often easily accept, "Oh I have to leave to pick my kid up". But…they look at me and I'm young…that it's like, "Oh, she has no responsibilities. She can give her entire time to work". I'm like, no but I do actually have some heavy things on me, even if I don't have a kid. Like, I'm financially responsible for my parents, my younger brother…With that comes a lot of extra admin … they're [management are] like, "Oh, yeah, it makes sense. You're [parents are] running a whole household". I'm like, so am I. But people don't necessarily know that. (Anjali, 26, Management Consultant).

Anjali reflects on her financial responsibilities and how they are overlooked due to her intersectional identity as a young, child-free woman. She mentioned that running a household and being a financial provider is not limited to parents, underscoring the stereotypes associated with age and responsibility. She suggests that younger individuals, particularly women, may not be viewed as legitimate caregivers if they do not have children. Research by Casper and Swanberg (2009) supports these findings, noting that single child-free professionals who held caring roles and provided financial support faced challenges in the workplace, including differential treatment in expectations to work, stigmatisation for their single identity, and a lack of support for their nonwork responsibilities. Anjali's assertion that her responsibilities go unrecognised reflects the "second shift" phenomenon explained by Hochschild and Machung (2012), where working women must negotiate professional duties and family responsibilities. Research indicates that the emotional and physical labour involved in caregiving can be extensive and demanding (Land, 2020; Schulz et al., 2020). This underscores the role strain experienced by child-free women as their intersecting roles of being workers and non-traditional caregivers are not recognised in organisations that reflect nuclear family values.

Additionally, participants noted that the perception that they lack family responsibilities, often led to the belief that they were less deserving of financial incentives or career advancement. Palesa, 34 years of age, working as a People and Office Manager shared her experience: “I’m thinking I might be missing out on some opportunities because I don’t have a kid…They (management) consider, when they’re offering a salary…the fact that you have a dependent, and I might be losing out on that as well”. Palesa’s sentiments highlight how child-free individuals can face subtle disadvantages in workplaces that prioritise employees with children. She sensed that her child-free status may be affecting her salary and opportunities, as some employers may perceive those with dependents as having greater financial needs. From an intersectional perspective, this bias disproportionately impacts child-free black women in South Africa as gendered obligations and kinship responsibilities go beyond the Western notion of the nuclear family (Metz, 2017; Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2019). This cultural nuance complicates the expectation that employees with children should be compensated more due to perceived financial needs, when in fact, child-free black workers may also bear huge familial caregiving responsibilities that are not captured by the standard, Westernised definition of ‘dependents’ (Bond, 2018).

The lack of financial support or salary disparity based on child status is not only culturally reductive but also unfair, as it frames child-free employees as having no commitments, thereby excluding them from career-advancing opportunities or equitable resource allocation (Verniers, 2020). This creates a systemic challenge where the professional worth of child-free individuals is undervalued, and their unique caregiving responsibilities are dismissed, ultimately reinforcing inequities and limiting their ability to thrive in the workplace. Jones (2014) found that married men received higher salaries than married women, and single men and women received less than married women. Some employers allocate higher salaries and benefits to employees with children, viewing them as more ‘in need’ resulting in inequitable compensation practices and widening the gender pay gap (Glauber, 2008; Jones, 2014). Two child-free women shared their experiences of reduced pay due to a perceived lack of responsibilities:

> I had…generated about 40% of my team’s revenue…my guy boss was like, “Yeah, but Zanele…the one guy has a stay-at-home wife…you guys [Zanele and her husband] are like a dual-income household… you don’t need the (bonus) money as much.” (Zanele, 32, Investment Banker).

> Just because I don’t have kids…If I say, for example, this month is rough, finances are tied… the assumption is that you’re spending your money recklessly rather than you

> [management] don't pay me enough. Also, you can't have conversations around wanting to be…paid more because "what do you need it for? You don't have the responsibilities and the extra costs that other people have. You're not doing enough to budget properly"…you're expected to do so much with so little, which is an experience that your male counterparts don't have. (Khanyisa, 28, Tax Consultant).

Despite generating 40% of her team's revenue, Zanele's contributions were devalued by her manager based on her family structure suggesting that she was less deserving of a bonus because her husband works whereas her male colleagues have stay-at-home wives. Similarly, Khanyisa shares how being child-free is often used to justify a lower salary or fewer resources, based on the assumption that without children or dependents, she has fewer financial burdens. Yet, her male child-free counterparts do not face the same stereotypes. Her intersectional identity marginalises her as she is perceived as having fewer financial commitments and thus expected to demonstrate "proper budgeting", without consideration of other personal or professional circumstances. This not only places undue pressure on her but also reinforces the notion that she must continually prove her worth and financial competence in ways that her male colleagues are not expected to, reinforcing the notion that child-free women appear to have simpler, less complex lives than their male counterparts.

Khanyisa's experience also highlights how child-free women are perceived as not being responsible when requesting to be compensated appropriately for work done. These sentiments were expressed by another child-free woman who stated that people frequently asked her: "What are you doing with your money because you don't have a child?" (Ayanda, 26, Global Partnerships Manager). Such questions imply a presumption that child-free women have no legitimate use for money, thus minimising their financial agency and autonomy. These three participants' experiences underscore how child-free women are overlooked for fair compensation. In this way, the "ideal worker" stereotype paradoxically works against child-free women as their contributions are perceived as less deserving of financial recognition compared to male employees who are seen as "primary breadwinners". Similarly, Marutlulle (2020) found that black child-free professional women in South Africa were deemed as being 'always available' yet received no reward or compensation for their extra efforts and work output. Zanele and Khanyisa's experiences specifically reveal a bias in organisations where pay and rewards are based on perceived personal needs rather than merit or performance. This aligns with Berdahl and Moon (2013) findings that gender and parental status, rather than work performance, determine workplace treatment, with child-free women being the most mistreated group. The assumptions faced by child-free women not only overlook their complex realities

as women but also reinforce the marginalisation of those who do not conform to traditional family structures. In this context, their financial autonomy and professional worth were often undervalued, leading to exclusionary practices or missed opportunities in the workplace.

Similar to Zanele, another child-free woman shared how her worth was indirectly tied to assumptions about her financial dependence on men:

> As a woman…you have to give up so much to be able to hold on to that career for a significant amount of time…by the time you do have kids, you've gotten to a point where you're making enough money because you pushed and you sacrificed to get there. But if I'm someone who's not trying to go about it that way, but I want kids, and I am asking to be compensated fairly and equally to…my counterparts both in the company and in the industry, the questioning and…the interrogation is around…if I have…a male counterpart, like a partner, then it becomes a thing of, "Oh, but no, your partner is probably earning enough for both of you. You don't need more money". You have money by virtue of being attached to someone else who has money. You don't deserve to seemingly be able to say that you can financially stand on your own two feet. (Khanyisa, 28, Tax Consultant).

Despite Khanyisa's desire for fair and equal compensation compared to her counterparts, she faced scrutiny and interrogation when requesting equitable pay. These questions reflect a pervasive bias where a woman's financial needs are evaluated through the lens of her partner's income, rather than her professional achievements or needs. As Khanyisa describes the assumption that she does not "need" more money due to her partner's presumed income, undermines her autonomy and financial independence, reducing her workplace value to her relationship status and connection to a man. For child-free black women, such assumptions could be detrimental as they already face structural barriers to economic mobility, including lower wages and fewer opportunities for advancement due to racial and gender biases (Glauber, 2008; Letterman et al., 2018). Thus, if their financial needs are questioned or disregarded due to their relationship status, it not only minimises their autonomy but also risks their long-term financial independence, leaving them more vulnerable in an economic system that already marginalises them, reinforcing class inequalities.

These particular tensions and oppressions are further amplified by age in the workplace. Ayanda shared how her intersectional identity undermines her in the workplace:

> It's the same economically. Men get big, big contracts. They get first preference, because people understand that they have families to feed and they have houses to pay for, and they have all these cars to finance…mistresses to finance… people understand that very well…As a woman then the playing field for your negotiation is inherently low…it's worse when you're young…I'm the youngest in my department…I notice how there's an undertone in, "Ugh, you're young. You don't have that much to do". It's

> weird…Those are the kinds of biases that I experience in corporate because I'm childless. (Ayanda, 26, Global Partnerships Manager).

Ayanda's mention of "men get big, big contracts" and the societal understanding of their financial obligations such as providing for families and even financing mistresses reflects a deeply ingrained gender bias in the workplace where men are seen as the economic providers, leading to more favourable financial arrangements as they are understood as having extra financial obligations, further reflecting societal biases that reward male privilege. In contrast, child-free women, are often seen as having fewer financial burdens, which can contribute to assumptions about their lack of need for salary increases or promotions. Ayanda's age adds another layer of complexity as she noted that her youth is often viewed as a reason for her lack of responsibilities. The age bias she experienced, being labelled as less experienced and less deserving of higher pay, further complicates her position as a young, child-free woman in the workplace. These assumptions and inherent discrimination can contribute to feelings of invisibility and neglect among child-free women, who have other responsibilities such as caregiving. Child-free women struggle to have their needs recognised and addressed, facing marginalisation regarding equitable pay, flexibility and autonomy at work (Filippi et al., 2024; Verniers, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2018).

In addition, child-free black women found that they were unable to make use of their family responsibility leave as it only catered to the immediate nuclear family (i.e. spouse, children, and parents). Yet, many grew up with extended families such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and nonblood relatives within a kin setting. One child-free woman discussed growing up in a non-nuclear household:

> I did not grow up with my parents…I grew up with my aunt and my late grandfather and with my cousins… When you grew up with somebody that is not your biological parent… You didn't feel like, you know, these are not your biological parents. (Refilwe, 37, Helpdesk Agent).

Refilwe described growing up in a non-nuclear household with her extended family. In South Africa, extended family and non-nuclear household structures are deeply embedded in the social and cultural landscape, shaping economic responsibilities and caregiving arrangements (Mokomane, 2013). Unlike the Western nuclear family model, many South African households include extended family members, who often live together or maintain strong relational ties that affect domestic roles and finances (Mokomane, 2013). According to Statistics South Africa (2020), around 36% of South African households are multigenerational,

a figure that underscores the prevalence of extended family living arrangements. This structure has roots in African communal traditions that emphasise collective responsibility, and economic necessities, where family members pool resources to navigate financial challenges and support one another (Metz, 2017; Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2019).

Yet, child-free black women do not feel like their workplaces are accommodating and understanding of these familial relations. For example, one child-free black woman stated: "I didn't feel like I could [ask]…I know what the response is going to be… "If you're going to go, then you could probably take it just against your annual leave". (Kamogelo, 24, Recruiter). Kamogelo anticipated that any request for accommodation would be met with a suggestion to use annual leave, revealing a policy bias in organisations that tend to prioritise caregiving needs associated with child-rearing over other forms of family responsibility. Child-free individuals often struggle for acknowledgement of their caregiving roles (Casper & Swanberg, 2009) and are hesitant to request accommodations due to anticipated managerial resistance. Munsch (2016) found that child-free women were often disadvantaged when requesting flexible work arrangements, as they were perceived as less deserving of such accommodations compared to their colleagues with children. This bias reflects societal norms that prioritise parenthood over other forms of WLB and the broader organisational expectation of the "ideal worker". Here, time flexibility and uninterrupted dedication to work are prized, creating an environment in which those with non-normative family responsibilities feel unsupported and often unheard (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). According to Wilkinson et al. (2017), the WLB challenges faced by child-free professionals results in burnout and stress.

One woman discusses performing care work as a family responsibility:

> When I was at home…it created an opportunity for me to pick up my niece from school... I specifically structured my day and the time such that I could go without having to say where I'm going. Because I knew…it would be a thing of "Why are you picking up your niece as much as a child? That's nothing…That doesn't count as a valid reason why you would not be in office, because it's not your child. Someone else can pick up the child", whereas… it's my responsibility…I am a part of the family and we share the responsibility…we were all raising the kids…I've seen it as well with a person of colour where they've tried to do the same thing (take time off) and it's… "Oh, go find someone else to do it"… there's a lack of consideration for people's cultural circumstances and realities…It's not my child biologically and legally, but that is a responsibility that I have. For example, me asking for more money is not because I want to spend recklessly, but because I have responsibilities at home that I am happy to take on, not because maybe my family is financially destitute... Those are the responsibilities that I have culturally. (Khanyisa, 28, Tax Consultant).

Khanyisa's case demonstrates that she was actively reconfiguring her role as a family member to accommodate her familial responsibilities. Her experience reflects the limits of traditional role expectations, where the workplace's understanding of responsibility is narrowly defined by biological or legal parenthood. This narrow definition marginalises Khanyisa's valid caregiving role in her family, reinforcing the idea that non-parental caregiving is not valued in the same way as biological or legal parental roles. Furthermore, Khanyisa's reference to another person of colour who faced similar dismissal when requesting time off underscores how workplace expectations often fail to recognise cultural nuances. This reinforces Khanyisa's decision to make her own experiences invisible, as she anticipated that her culturally driven responsibilities, like picking up her niece, would be dismissed as insignificant as they are incongruent with the traditional and often Eurocentric mould of what constitutes valid time away from work. Additionally, Khanyisa mentions that she was happy to take on these responsibilities for cultural reasons rather than financial needs, drawing attention to her desire for more money. Rather than constituting reckless spending or financial dependence, it was instead about fulfilling cultural obligations. This distinction is important, as it underscores how financial needs in global South contexts may be seen differently in the workplace. Rather than being driven by a need for financial stability, Khanyisa's motivation to seek a higher income came from a place of cultural duty, which is often overlooked in organisations where individualistic, financially driven goals are the norm (Metz, 2017) but are structured around the needs of white male workers who do not share the same experiences or obligations (Acker, 1990). This makes her experience of balancing cultural responsibilities with workplace expectations even more complex and layered.

Khanyisa's attempt to navigate this system by structuring her day to avoid explaining her caregiving duties points to the conflict between her family role and her professional employee role. The pressure to maintain a certain image in the workplace, one that aligns with being the ideal worker, forces her to conceal aspects of her life that are important to her identity and responsibilities. This creates a disconnect between her full identity as a caregiver in her household and the role she must perform within her organisation, resulting in financial burdens and role strain for participants like Khanyisa as they attempt to combine responsibilities that are seen as fundamental within their cultural context but are sidelined by the mainstream workplace. Her race further marginalised her as she suggested that, as a person of colour, her attempt to balance familial obligations was not viewed with the same respect or validity compared to someone from a different racial and cultural background.

Many child-free black women discussed the hurdles they faced when having to explain why they needed time off work to tend to familial responsibilities:

> My gran…was probably the most important figure in my life…she was the one who primarily brought me up…from an African household perspective…she actually would be the equivalent of, what my mom was…I remember having to justify…"She's not just a gran"…which I think is crazy to say…this is, you know, the equivalent of my mom has passed away, so I do need to have this time… I think it is because corporate is. It's a very Westernised culture. (Zanele, 32, Investment Banker).

> God forbid, if someone would pass on, I need to start doing gymnastics because they cater for immediate family members. And for us as black people, it ever so slightly extends beyond that. (Kamogelo, 24, Recruiter).

The experiences of these participants showcase how child-free black women are marginalised in organisational cultures that are influenced by the global North. For Zanele, the death of her grandmother, a central maternal figure, required her to justify her grief and need for leave, underscoring a lack of understanding around familial roles in African households, where caregiving often extends beyond biological parents. Additionally, Kamogelo's use of the term "gymnastics" vividly captures the mental, emotional, and logistical contortions child-free black women must endure to reconcile their cultural realities with workplace policies rooted in Eurocentric norms (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Evans & Moore, 2015; Foste & Johnson, 2021). Similarly, Bianca, 32-years-old, working as a Lecturer and Media Liaison anticipates challenges in requesting time off for family responsibilities as a child-free individual: "If it was a family member...I suspect there would be a higher burden of...expectation to explain a bit more...". Here Bianca suggests that, unlike parents, she anticipates being held to a higher standard of explanation when requesting family responsibility leave. Supporting this, Turnbull et al. (2023) found that when needing to take time off child-free individuals must ideologically justify any deviation from organisational and societal norms, as their choices lack the legitimacy of caregiving responsibilities.

For child-free black women, this tension is particularly pronounced as South African workplace policies are centred around nuclear family structures and exclude familial bonds common in African communities, where individuals may be raised by extended family members, blurring traditional familial boundaries leaving child-free employees to be excluded and unsupported. These findings are supported by Anand and Mitra (2022), who argue that traditional HR policies often fail to acknowledge culturally expansive definitions of family, creating stress for employees as they navigate policies that invalidate their responsibilities. Dixon and Dougherty (2014) note that child-free workers experience simultaneous and

paradoxical invisibility and hypervisibility as traditional family structures are prioritised in the workplace, causing them to adapt to these norms.

The lack of inclusivity in workplace policies exacerbates the emotional and logistical strain of combining work and family, especially for child-free employees from diverse cultural backgrounds. The disconnect between cultural realities and organisational policies reinforces the marginalisation of child-free women, who, though not parents themselves, are still expected to fulfil gendered caregiving roles. They are burdened with unacknowledged care responsibilities while being denied access to leave policies that could support their roles within the extended family. This oversight perpetuates a workplace culture that fails to reflect the lived realities of many child-free black women, further entrenching systemic inequality. In the organisational context, family needs to be redefined to challenge traditional gendered and racial assumptions about caregiving, providing space for child-free women, particularly those of colour, to be seen and valued for their contributions without being judged against normative family structures.

Unseen needs: Fostering inclusive spaces for child-free workers

Child-free black women are positioned as 'ideal workers', frequently perceived as having fewer personal responsibilities, leading to expectations of greater flexibility, availability, and taking on extra work. This perception resulted in them having less time off, perpetuating a workplace culture that undervalued their time and personal boundaries and negatively impacted their well-being. For child-free black women, their roles may involve caregiving and financial obligations toward extended family. Yet, the demands of their time and resources challenge their caregiving roles. This underscores the need for workplaces to adapt and extend benefits beyond traditional family structures, fostering equity and a sense of belonging for all employees.

Many participants expressed frustration around the expectation to work longer hours, with many desiring well-defined work hours:

> I would like better defined work hours…So we're all kind of judged with the same…elements that we've put in x hours a day…Having an ability to articulate all of the other outside of work events which I have to do or I'm forced to do and have that …count towards…the performance appraisals…more explicitly. (Zanele, 32, Investment Banker).

Zanele's request for "better-defined work hours" and a performance appraisal system that considers outside obligations reflects a desire for equitable treatment in the workplace. Research on WLB and boundary theory suggests that employees benefit from clear boundaries

between work and personal time, which can reduce burnout and enhance job satisfaction (Kossek et al., 2011). In Zanele's case, clear work hours would provide consistency and help prevent the 'spillover' of work demands into personal time, which is particularly important for child-free black women who must juggle significant non-work obligations. Zanele's call for performance appraisals to consider external commitments reflects the work-family enrichment theory, which argues that recognising employees' non-work roles can contribute positively to organisational outcomes by reducing stress and promoting engagement (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Acknowledging employees' unique commitments and responsibilities in performance evaluations may also mitigate biases in appraisal systems, which often favour individuals who can devote more time to work due to fewer external demands (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011).

One child-free woman expressed a desire to be seen and heard:

> As much as they make room for parents, they must also make room for individuals…that don't have kids… they never really pay much attention to us because majority have… kids… If I were to say something besides me having an emergency, I really have to up and be, now just be understanding of that…I don't have to have a reason to say that I'm going to get my kid at school…(Boitumelo, 26, Financial Officer).

This quote highlights the participant's desire for workplace inclusivity for child-free women, suggesting that workplaces should accommodate the needs of this demographic similarly to parents. This request aligns with research indicating that many workplaces implicitly prioritise family-oriented needs, sometimes rendering child-free women invisible (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). Literature suggests that child-free women are unlikely to receive the same benefits, respect for nonwork life, work expectations and opportunities as those with children (Blight et al., 2022; Filippi et al., 2024; Marutlulle, 2020; Verniers, 2020).

The child-free women advocates for equal treatment for all employees, not for special accommodations. One chid-free woman, Palesa, 34 years of age, working as a People and Office Manager, shared: "Standardised packages. Standardised, working from home policies and guidance, you know, things that are applicable to everyone so that other people don't feel like you are, you know, being unfairly treated". Palesa discussed a desire for greater emphasis on standardised packages and working-from-home policies allowing for fairness and consistency in the workplace. Two other child-free women noted that the necessary policies were in place in organisations but were not consistently applied to all employees:

> The issues with the implementation and the consistency of that implementation…What's communicated…is that "We [organisation] are supportive of your circumstance...we care about our employees and their well-being, and we will do

> what we can to support you in the specific circumstances that you're in". The way that's…applied in real life is very inconsistent…I think a policy that is overly specific to…child-free females in the company might also be more issues than do good…It can depend on the person applying the policy and the person, the policies being applied to. (Khanyisa, 28, Tax Consultant).

> Leave or like expectations around the flexibility of your time…I think should be true for child-free and people with children. Just like employees need to have boundaries around free time and that needs to be consistent like it shouldn't be, less boundaries for parents, more boundaries for child-free people. (Bianca, 32, Lecturer and Media Liaison).

Khanyisa's experience underscores the discrimination faced by marginalised groups such as child-free women. Khanyisa shared the discretionary nature of policy application and how such variability introduces subjectivity. Furthermore, Khanyisa raised a concern about the potential pitfalls of overly specific policies targeting child-free women. While such policies may aim to address inequities, they risk other unintended consequences, such as singling out child-free women in ways that could further stigmatise or isolate them. Similarly to Khanyisa, Bianca desires equitable treatment of employees regarding leave and expectations around time flexibility, regardless of parental status. She advocates for consistent workplace boundaries that apply equally to both child-free individuals and those with children. Despite policies being intended to support all employees, their inconsistent implementation often undermines these goals, especially for marginalised groups like child-free women.

One child-free woman noted that embracing child-free identities in organisations requires a culture shift:

> The world of work is changing…including flexibility in our practices and our policies … acknowledging that maybe our policies and our practices and our culture (have) no longer become sustainable. How do we become inclusive for the diversity that is happening within our organisations? How do we amend that? How do we accommodate the different cultures that are non-Western, that do not conform to what we would classify as immediate family members in the event of death, in the event of illness, in the event of whatever, how do we adjust and welcome that change? So, it would require an entire culture shift as opposed to just changing policies (Kamogelo, 24, Recruiter).

Kamogelo highlights that current policies and practices may no longer be sustainable as work environments evolve. She refers to the need for systems that can continue to thrive over time while meeting the diverse needs of a workforce. In terms of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), sustainability requires policies that accommodate changing workforce demographics, such as a more diverse range of family structures, caregiving responsibilities, and cultural expectations (Shore et al., 2018). Kamogelo also emphasised the importance of inclusivity in the workplace, particularly regarding global South cultural values that may not

align with traditional, Eurocentric family structures. Inclusivity in the context of DEI involves more than just policy changes; it requires a shift in organisational culture to embrace a broader range of identities and experiences (Shore et al., 2018). Organisations that fail to recognise and accommodate these global South structures risk alienating a significant portion of their workforce (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). Thus, without such shifts, superficial policy changes may not fully address child-free black women's unique needs.

Another child-free woman, Natalia, 29-years-old, working as a Lecturer expressed similar sentiments: "May not be kids, but I could be taking care of my grandfather...I think the nature of care (is) shifting. And maybe policies that support that can be useful". Natalia's quote underscores the limited recognition of diverse caregiving roles in the workplace. She highlights that while some employees may need time for non-traditional caregiving responsibilities, such as caring for elderly relatives, workplace policies often narrowly focus on childcare. This lack of recognition makes it challenging for line managers to foster an inclusive environment for employees with varied caregiving duties, as policies like family responsibility leave do not account for this diversity. Research indicates that a socially inclusive culture improves single child-free employees' job performance and leisure satisfaction by reducing their work-to-personal conflict (Shi & Shi, 2022). Yet, traditional policies frequently overlook caregiving for ageing or extended family members, leaving child-free employees or those with alternative family roles unsupported (Casper & Swanberg, 2009). Such policy gaps can hinder workplace inclusivity, suggesting a need for more flexible, comprehensive leave policies. Expanding caregiving support can help foster a culture where all forms of care are valued, better aligning with the diverse realities of today's workforce.

Such flexibility around leave can result in positive workplaces for child-free women:

> They're very generous when they grant leave, and they're quite flexible…if I had a last minute emergency, I don't have to go through…a rigorous process to get leave…they're not micromanaging… That's why I really value where I work…I'm treated as a person. Like, I'm definitely seen as a full person and not just someone that works. (Tahera, 30, Administrative Research Assistant).

Tahera's reflection highlights the profound impact of supportive workplace policies and a culture of trust on employee satisfaction. She expressed appreciation for her manager's flexibility, noting that her child-free manager understands the importance of being recognised as a "whole person", unbound by ideal worker expectations. By avoiding micromanagement and demonstrating generosity with leave policies, her manager reflects a culture that prioritises well-being. This empathetic leadership not only enhances the employee's sense of value but

also highlights how shared identities between managers and employees can contribute positively to workplace dynamics (Naseer et al., 2023). Such positive experiences of child-free women in the workplace lead to them wanting to go the extra mile:

> I know that I can go beyond 17:00 but also it's because the company treats us so well. So that is why I'm able to also say…we are not in a toxic work environment. Why can't I go the extra mile the same way? You know, the company can do a favour when you need a favour from them. (Refilwe, 37, Helpdesk Agent).

This child-free participant discussed willingly working past her defined working hours when work was demanding. This was directly tied to the positive treatment she received from her organisation. Refilwe's narrative reflects the principles of reciprocity theory, which articulates that positive actions by one party often elicit a corresponding response from another (Gouldner, 1960). In the workplace, when employees perceive fairness, support, and respect from their organisations, they are more likely to reciprocate through discretionary behaviours, such as working beyond contractual obligations (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Recent literature supports this sentiment, showing that positive work environments encourage discretionary effort among employees. Mazzetti and Schaufeli (2022) found that employees are more likely to go above and beyond their role expectations in workplaces that demonstrate mutual respect, flexibility, and support. When organisations foster such environments, employees, are more inclined to adopt ideal worker behaviours, not out of obligation, but as a reciprocal gesture of commitment to an organisation they feel invested in and that is equally invested in them. Similarly, another child-free woman shared how her organisation supports the well-being needs of all employees:

> Very progressive and supportive…We even have well-being days where they literally tell you… "Guys, you need to switch off"… If you joined the organisation in Jan, then Jan, the following year, you have to take compulsory ten-day leave, or the system flags you to say, like, we've got an operations risk here. (Thabile, 30, Investment Banker).

Thabile described how her organisation's proactive approach to employee well-being supports all employees, including child-free workers. Policies such as mandatory well-being days and compulsory leave requirements acknowledge the importance of rest and recovery for all, regardless of family status. This approach can benefit child-free employees, who are often expected to take on extra work due to assumptions that they have fewer external responsibilities. Research highlights the importance of organisational policies in mitigating burnout and promoting sustainable work practices. For example, Tripathi (2021) found that time off work supported recovery from work demands, reducing the risk of exhaustion and enhancing productivity and engagement. These well-being-focused policies help to address the

unique pressures faced by child-free employees, who may otherwise lack opportunities to 'switch off' due to their perceived flexibility and availability. This suggests that by emphasising rest and enforcing WLB for all, organisations can help foster an inclusive culture that values each employee's well-being. Yet for some, this shift in creating meaningful change for child-free women felt unlikely:

> I think it will never change. I think the expectations and pressure will be the same because I don't think this was just adopted now… it's been there, and it will always be there until someone steps in and comes in and says, we need change. 123 is not working for some people. We need to make change around this but if that doesn't happen, then I think for the fact that you don't have kids, you'll always be expected to do something. You always be expected to go work after hours and do things above and beyond your payroll. (Boitumelo, 26, Financial Officer).

These sentiments expressed by Boitumelo underscore the challenging workplace expectations that disproportionately affect child-free employees. Her reflection on the unrelenting pressure to go above and beyond, often without recognition or compensation draws attention to the importance of recognising and addressing the unique tensions faced by child-free employees in workplaces often centred on traditional family dynamics. Child-free black women were subjected to pervasive workplace assumptions about having greater availability, often resulting in unfair workload distributions and biased leave practices. Yet, they had financial and caring familial responsibilities that were unacknowledged and unrecognised by organisations. They lacked the necessary support such as financial benefits, leave policy and co-worker/managerial support to deal with their complex realities. In cases where support existed, it resulted in positive outcomes, such as improved well-being and job satisfaction. To foster equity, organisations must confront these disparities by reshaping workplace norms and policies. Building an inclusive work culture that values and supports the varied responsibilities of all employees, irrespective of parental status, is essential for promoting fairness and ensuring all employees feel equally supported and respected.

Chapter 5: Recommendations, Implications and Concluding Remarks

This study explored the lived experiences of child-free black women in various South African organisations. The findings revealed the "availability paradox", wherein they were assumed to have fewer responsibilities, resulting in heavier workloads and less flexibility compared to their colleagues with children. Despite being child-free, they shouldered numerous cultural obligations in the forms of caring and financial support to extended family members,

a burden that was typically unacknowledged by workplace policies shaped around traditional nuclear family models and parenthood. This chapter outlines the study's contribution to knowledge, managerial implications, limitations and recommendations for future research.

Contribution to knowledge

This research aimed to deepen scholarly understanding of child-freeness in organisations by exploring the experiences of black women in South Africa. By integrating role theory with intersectionality, this study provides nuanced, novel insights into how race, gender, and child-free status intersect to shape these women's workplace experiences. While intersectionality is rarely combined with role theory, this approach illuminated the unique challenges they face due to systemic biases, ideal worker norms and cultural expectations that influence their roles and identities within their personal lives and workplaces. The findings revealed that black child-free employees were expected to navigate workplace cultures that prioritise and idealise parenthood leading to role strain and conflict (Biddle, 1986).

Role theory provided a useful framework for understanding how child-free black women construct and negotiate their identities in the context of their work roles (Kahn et al., 1964; Katz, 1978). This theory has traditionally been used in global North contexts (e.g., Bear, 2021; Wayne & Casper, 2016). This study applies it in a global South context to offer a culturally relevant perspective on role construction and identity negotiation. Many participants revealed expectations of traditional gender roles (as wives, daughters, sisters and granddaughters) as well as familial care responsibilities (within nuclear and kin family settings), creating conflicting demands for the child-free black woman. Despite being burdened with unique job demands, such as assumptions about their constant availability and willingness to work overtime, and in keeping with the ideal worker norms (Chung et al., 2022; Tanquerel & Santistevan, 2022), they lacked the necessary organisational support typically afforded to parents, as they were perceived to lack caregiving roles. These insights underscore the importance of role theory in addressing the tension between workplace expectations and personal responsibilities, revealing how organisational norms can marginalise and overburden child-free black women.

Based on the available literature, it is evident that the existing body of research on child freeness in the workplace predominantly focuses on the global North and is influenced by perspectives of workers who are white, wealthy and well-educated (Arena et al., 2023). Boiarinsteva et al. (2022) have called for child-freeness to be explored among diverse demographics across rich ethnic, cultural, and national backgrounds. This study responds to

this call for expanding knowledge of child-free workers and enhancing theoretical understanding of the lived realities of employees who are frequently overlooked in work-family research (Ali et al., 2017; Beauregard et al., 2020; Özbilgin et al., 2011). This study offers new insights from the global South, focusing on marginalised women, thus responding to calls for an intersectional exploration of child-freeness among marginalised groups (França, 2022; Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018; Verniers, 2020).

As the present study addressed research calls to include and amplify the voices of underrepresented individuals in research (Collins et al., 2019; McCracken, 2020), it gave black women a platform to share their lived realities, challenges, and opportunities in the workplace. Further, it offered a way for these narratives to be amplified, counteracting the historical underrepresentation and marginalisation of black women in research and across various spheres of society at large. By integrating intersectionality with role theory, this study drew nuanced insight into how child-free black women's race, gender and child-free status shaped their experience which resulted in internalised role expectations that exacerbated role strain and role conflict (Creary & Gordon, 2016). The intersectional identity held by these child-free women forced them to internalise the role of the 'ideal worker' in workplaces that undervalued and questioned their abilities, reinforcing the need to over-perform to avoid role conflict. This overperformance was done at the detriment of their own well-being and personal relationships demonstrating how expectations tied to their intersectional identities clash with personal demands (Filippi et al., 2024; Moe et al., 2023). Child-free black women received limited support from colleagues, managers and their organisations to manage their unique challenges, ultimately reinforcing their sense of isolation and exclusion at work. This lack of acknowledgement of their unique challenges and responsibilities perpetuated inequitable treatment and left them to navigate systemic biases.

Lastly, by clearly distinguishing between the terms "childless" and "child-free", this study helped clarify the nuances between these identities. Childless typically refers to individuals unable to have children due to circumstances often associated with loss or unfulfilled desires (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). In contrast, "childfree" describes those who consciously choose not to have children (Verniers, 2020). This study not only increased awareness and usage of the term "child-free" but also provided more insight into the distinct experiences, challenges, and societal perceptions tied to the child-free identity, ensuring a more precise understanding in academic discourse and promoting visibility and inclusivity for child-free individuals in research. The study findings suggest that the term "temporarily childless

and/or child-free by circumstance" should be included in the discourse surrounding child-freeness. Given the prevalence of extended family responsibilities in the global South context, child-free individuals often bear caregiving and financial burdens that are not accounted for by traditional definitions. Thus, for many child-free black women, the choice to postpone motherhood may not necessarily be a choice but rather due to cultural and familial obligations such as caregiving and financial burdens, which often come before personal needs and desires.

Managerial implications

Assumptions about the availability of child-free workers and the resulting increased work demands led to the erasure of their responsibilities outside of work, including caregiving roles shaped by cultural and gendered expectations. The study findings highlight that managers need to be more aware of the needs of child-free women and offer support for women who choose not to have children. Given the rising number of individuals without children, particularly women (Bongaarts, 2015; Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017; Masebe & Ramosebudi, 2015; Miettinen et al., 2015), management needs to progressively recognise the necessity of cultivating and overseeing a workforce that is more diverse and should proactively strategise for this going forward (Mazibuko & Govender, 2017; Roberson, 2019). Hence, the following managerial implications could be implemented within organisations to attract, retain and support diverse workforces.

Organisations should adopt flexible working arrangements, such as hybrid and remote working models and non-regulated working hours (Bjärntoft et al., 2020). These working arrangements must be applied consistently and made accessible to all employees, irrespective of parental status, to ensure fairness and increased inclusivity (Williams & Multhaup, 2018). Flexible working arrangements were identified as a strategy among the study participants to better manage their gendered role obligations and caregiving responsibilities. These arrangements would enable them to care for family members or extended relatives while maintaining their work commitments. By providing the option to work from home or adjust their schedules beyond conventional working hours, organisations can support these child-free employees in fulfilling cultural and familial obligations without compromising their professional responsibilities (Glas, 2022; Jaga et al., 2018; Raina et al., 2020; Wayne & Casper, 2016). The inability of organisations to recognise the needs of child-free black women can ultimately reinforce WLC among these workers, leading to high levels of stress and anxiety, disharmony at home, job burnout and inability to realise their full potential (Bakker et al., 2023; Nayak & Pandey, 2015; Sundaresan, 2014). Research has shown that when employees find

WLB arrangements to be beneficial, it enhances individual well-being and organisational performance (Chaudhuri et al., 2020; Perrigino et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2020).

Additionally, organisations need to recognise diverse family structures that go beyond nuclear family models, particularly in South Africa's diverse and culturally rich context. For child-free black women, this means addressing their unique challenges, such as caregiving responsibilities due to cultural norms. Traditional workplace policies often overlook these roles, focusing primarily on nuclear family structures. Thus, managers should revisit leave and benefits policies to support extended family roles. HR policies that fail to recognise the culturally expansive definition of family lead to elevated stress for marginalised identities (Anand & Mitra, 2022). The Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) makes provision for full-time workers to receive three days of paid family responsibility leave each year. This leave can be taken for specific events such as childbirth, child illness, and the death of an immediate family member. Child-free individuals who do not have children are therefore only granted family responsibility leave for the death of a spouse, life partner, parent, grandparent or sibling (Republic of South Africa, 1997). This current leave policy marginalises child-free women as it fails to account for their unique caregiving responsibilities within extended family structures, further reinforcing their exclusion from workplace benefits that support caregiving. In the absence of legislation, organisations should strive to support child-free black women by affording them the same flexibility and autonomy as workers with children. This includes recognising their caregiving roles within extended family structures and offering similar WLB accommodations and leave policies. By doing so, companies can foster an inclusive environment that values all employees' diverse responsibilities, irrespective of parental status.

Child-free employees often face heavier workloads due to assumptions about their availability. Research by Perrigino et al. (2018) demonstrates that such biases contribute to burnout and decreased job satisfaction. Hence, managers should implement fair workload distribution and performance metrics that do not favour employees based on parental status. This can be supported by transparent policies and regular audits to ensure equitable treatment, fostering a sense of fairness across all employee groups. Furthermore, this fairness should extend to pay parity. Child-free employees should not be penalised based on stereotypes that suggest they require less financial support as these undermine equitable compensation for equal work. Transparent pay structures, as recommended by Castilla (2015), can help ensure that salaries are determined objectively, free from bias tied to parental status. Fair pay reinforces gender and workplace equity by recognising the value of all employees' contributions,

regardless of their personal or familial circumstances. Additionally, if faced with extra work demands, child-free employees should be fairly compensated (e.g., overtime pay, bonuses or additional leave) or be acknowledged for their time and effort (e.g., gift vouchers, recognition in meetings or newsletters and awards). They should also receive the necessary support to cope with such demands, such as access to mental health resources, counselling facilities or mentoring programmes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2017). This support acknowledges their contributions while promoting their well-being and professional development.

These initiatives would create a more supportive environment for child-free black women and a culture where they feel equally valued. Challenging stereotypes, such as the assumption that child-free women have no obligations due to the absence of children, would draw attention to their multiple roles outside of work. Regular diversity training and open dialogue about varied family structures would support this. Kundu and Lata (2017), emphasise that inclusive cultures boost belongingness and engagement, which leads to stronger organisational commitment. Organisations that meaningfully include and celebrate all life choices where all employees feel valued and supported, benefit through enhanced retention and a more satisfied and committed workforce (Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019; Kundu & Lata, 2017).

Implications for the field of Organisational Psychology

The study raises several implications for the field of Organisational psychology. Firstly, the study contributes to identity and belonging at work. By centring the lived realities of child-free black women, this research extends current knowledge on how social identities interact with organisational culture and affect experiences of inclusion, fairness, and recognition. Additionally, the study supports Organisational Psychology's goal of enhancing employee well-being by advocating for culturally and socially responsive policies (Kock et al., 2025; Van De Voorde et al., 2012). Combs et al. (2019) draw attention to persisting challenges around DEI's practical relevance and theoretical advancements in organisations. This study contributes to growing discussion around DEI in the workplace by advocating for more updated inclusion models that are fluid, intersectional, and responsive to emerging identity formations, not just those with legal or historical recognition in organisational structures such as gender, race and disability (Morfaki & Morfaki, 2022; Shore et al., 2011).

Practically, the study informs how organisations can better design cultures, policies, and leadership practices that account for diverse identity experiences. Organisations should develop training programs to educate managers and leaders on DEI. Furthermore, organisations

can conduct regular equity audits to assess whether policies, leadership practices, and reward systems inadvertently disadvantage child-free black women or other minority identity groups. In addition, organisations can offer employees resource groups or discussion forums where individuals, such as child-free black women, can share experiences related to identity and belonging.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Two main limitations were identified in the study. Firstly, the researcher focused on women in white-collar professional roles yet blue-collar women may face further intersectional complexities shaped by their SES and social class. These realities remain largely unaddressed in literature on child-free workers (e.g., França, 2022; Verniers, 2020; Wilkinson & Rouse, 2023). Blue-collar workers often face lower wages, unpredictable hours, and limited workplace flexibility (Damen et al., 2023), which could influence their perspectives on WLB and child-freeness differently from white-collar workers**.** Therefore, future research should focus on diverse socioeconomic cohorts, specifically blue-collar workers whose perspectives on WLB, availability and caring obligations may differ due to typically earning lower pay compared to white-collar workers who enjoy a consistent and often lucrative salary (Warren, 2015).

Secondly, this study only focused on voluntarily child-free women. Given the researcher's time constraints to recruit participants, the cohort was limited to voluntarily child-free women to expand the sampling reach, hence excluding the experiences of involuntarily child-free women, who may face different emotional, social, and workplace tensions. In South Africa, where cultural and familial expectations around parenthood are prevalent, involuntarily child-free women may experience unique stigmas and pressures. Literature suggests that in the African context, infertility is perceived as a woman's responsibility due to deeply rooted cultural and societal norms that associate fertility primarily with women (Chimbatata & Malimba, 2016; Ikeke, 2021). When a couple faces infertility, the woman is frequently blamed (Ikeke, 2021). The stigma, marginalisation and discrimination faced by child-free women lead to various forms of emotional and social distress, including isolation, low self-worth, gossip, and even divorce (Baloyi, 2017; Kuug et al., 2023). Thus, future research on this topic should be extended to include involuntarily child-free women in South Africa, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how involuntarily child-freeness, intersects with race, gender, and culture in shaping workplace experiences.

Conclusion

This study explored the workplace experiences of child-free black women in South

Africa. By integrating intersectionality with role theory, the study drew attention to how participants were expected to navigate workplace cultures that idealised parenthood, shaped by male-centric norms and reinforced entrenched racial power dynamics. Through the use of role theory and intersectionality, this study was able to provide a framework for understanding how child-free black women negotiate their identities in the context of their workplace roles, drawing attention to the complex interplay between individual identity perception, organisational demands and societal expectations. They encountered unique job demands related to organisational attitudes and norms surrounding availability. Despite this, they lacked resources such as work autonomy and flexibility, social support from co-workers and managers, and appropriate workplace policies to cope with these demands. Intersectionality helped reveal the systemic nature of these inequalities, emphasising the need for organisations to implement tailored policies, practices, and interventions to address the specific tensions faced by child-free black women in the workplace.

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Note. Please note that Artificial intelligence was utilised, specifically ChatGPT and Grammarly, to refine some sentences for grammatical clarity and conciseness to maintain the dissertation within the desired page limit.

Appendix A

Summary Table of Literature Review Articles

Table 1

Summary Table of Literature Review Articles

Authors and date	Theoretical Framework	Method and design	Sample & Country	Main finding	Limitations
Fillipi et al. (2024)	Deservingness Heuristics	Quantitative study (experiment)	288 male and female parents and non-parents, average age of 35, Italy and Netherlands	There were no significant differences in perceptions of deservingness; however, the findings highlight considerable disparities in prioritising work-life balance arrangements, with female employees who have children receiving higher priority than those without.	The study may have been affected by sampling bias, as data were gathered from a convenience sample.
Hadley (2024)	Unspecified	Qualitative study	23 white British men and two Celtic Australian men who either identified as homo or heterosexual, aged 32-82, UK	In the workplace, parents were granted more flexibility, with the implicit assumption or expectation that child-free colleagues would take on additional responsibilities to cover for them. Furthermore, the findings showed that being a child-free man influences career opportunities, such as roles involving work with children, and perceptions of work competence.	Unspecified

Hintz (2023)	Not applicable	Literature review	Not applicable	Workplace norms, stereotypes, and policies disproportionately favour employees with children while marginalising child-free individuals, creating inequities in workload, opportunities, and recognition. These dynamics negatively impact the work-life balance, organisational commitment, and perceptions of fairness among child-free employees.	Not applicable
Mumford et al. (2023)	Brown and Coupland's (2015) framework of Identity Threat Construal and Response	Qualitative study	80 parents and involuntarily childless men and women (73 UK, two USA, two Australia, and three from Cyprus, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands)	Individuals undergoing fertility journeys experience identity threats and stigma at work, compounded by organisational silence and lack of support.	Focused primarily on high-income professionals, limiting generalisability to other socioeconomic groups.
Turnbull et al. (2023)	Unspecified	Qualitative study	51 employed parents and non-parents, above the age of 25 Australia and 4 other countries	Childless individuals often face multilevel constraints that push them to prioritise job demands. Furthermore, when needing to take time off childless individuals must ideologically justify any deviation from organisational and societal norms, as their choices lack the legitimacy of caregiving responsibilities. Childless individuals also sacrifice discretionary aspects of life, such as socialising and well-being, to meet extreme work demands.	Study demographics were predominantly confined to white and upper-middle class individuals.

Wang & Chen (2023)	Unspecified	Quantitative study (experiment)	540 employers across various industries, China	Childfree women perceived as being of childbearing age faced higher discrimination in hiring, with fewer callbacks compared to other candidates.	Context-specific findings may not generalise to other labour markets with different cultural or policy environments.
Wilkinson & Rouse (2023)	Unspecified	Qualitative study	18 childless professional women who live alone, aged 24–44, UK	Childless, solo-living women experience pressure to conform to the “balanced mother ideal”, often navigating stigma and exclusion in professional and personal domains.	Precluded exploration of the identifications of childless solo-living professional women beyond late fertility.
Arntz et al. (2022)	Unspecified	Quantitative study (Linear regression)	Employed male and female parents and non-parents, aged 20–65, Germany	Childless employees put in an additional hour of unpaid overtime each week and experience increased job satisfaction after adopting remote work.	Unspecified
Blight et al. (2022)	Distributive Justice Theory	Mixed-methods study	185 employed parents and non-parents, NA	Single and child-free employees reported significantly less access to benefits, lower consideration of their work expectations, and less respect for their non-work roles.	Sample was predominantly female
Boiarintseva et al. (2022)	Unspecified	Qualitative study	21 Caucasian dual-career professional married couples, aged 25-55, Canada and USA	Despite not having child-rearing responsibilities, participants still faced numerous non-work-related obligations.	Study demographics were confined to white and upper-middle class individuals.
França (2022)	Unspecified	Qualitative study	Seven child-free female academics, ages 38-46, Portugal	Childfree women academics felt undervalued and overlooked during the pandemic, with assumptions that they had fewer responsibilities compared to colleagues with children.	Context-specific findings (Covid-19 pandemic)

Hoeh et al. (2022)	Unspecified	Qualitative study (authors personal accounts)	Three child-free and childless mid-career academics, US	Women in academia often face career barriers tied to societal and institutional expectations about motherhood. Childless and childfree women navigate these expectations by adopting “Plan B” career strategies.	Unspecified
Shi & Shi (2022)	Social Role Theory	Quantitative study (Hierarchical linear modelling)	639 single childless employees and their direct supervisors, China	A socially inclusive workplace culture enhances the job performance and leisure satisfaction of single, childless employees by minimising work-to-personal life conflicts.	The cross-sectional design limited the ability to track changes in employees’ perceptions of work-life conflict over time.
Wilkison et al. (2022)	Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model	Qualitative study	35 male and female solo-living employees, ages 30's-50's, UK	The shift to remote work during lockdown presented unique challenges for solo-living employees often exacerbated by changes to the demands and resources of others – namely those with childcare responsibilities.	Self-selection nature of participation
Gloor et al. (2021)	Intersectionality	Quantitative study (experiment)	791 early career academics comprised of parents and non-parents, average age of 33, Switzerland	Child-free women face workplace biases due to assumptions about potential parenthood, impacting hiring, promotions, and opportunities. Unlike men, they are stereotyped as less committed to their careers, creating barriers to advancement even when they choose to remain child-free.	Sample was largely white heterosexual individuals
Magda & Lipowska (2021)	Unspecified	Quantitative study (logistic regression)	263,766 observations from employed individuals aged 25-54, 25 European countries	Parents, both mothers and fathers, are more likely than childless colleagues to access flexible working hours.	Unspecified

Maglalang et al. (2021)	Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model	Quantitative study (binary logistic regressions)	874 healthcare workers between the aged of 30-39, US	Married healthcare workers without children reported the highest rate of burnout as well as higher odds of burnout compared to single healthcare workers.	The study used a single-item measure of burnout meaning only a single aspect of burnout was measured
Mård (2021)	Emotion Work	Qualitative study	17 involuntarily childless women, aged 25-50, Finland	Involuntary childless employees often engage in emotional labour to manage workplace interactions, dealing with insensitive questions or assumptions about their childlessness. These individuals experience marginalisation, as their childless status is often stigmatised, leading to exclusion from workplace conversations or social activities centred around family life. Furthermore, they frequently feel inadequate or less valued compared to colleagues with children, leading to lower self-esteem and feelings of being ‘out of place’ in family-oriented work cultures.	Study findings are limited to the Nordic working life context.
Salamin (2021)	Unspecified	Qualitative study	20 single and childless female expatriates, aged 21-50, Switzerland	Single and childless expatriate women face unique challenges in managing work-life balance, including isolation and cultural expectations.	The inclusion of different types of expatriates (e.g., self-initiated and assigned expatriates) may have introduced variability in experiences. Prior research suggests that these groups may have distinct work-life interface dynamics, which were not separately analysed in the study.

Akanji et al. (2020)	Organisational Justice Theory	Qualitative study	44 single male and female middle-line bank managers and medical doctors, aged 25-40, Nigeria	Single professionals face unique challenges in achieving work-life balance due to societal and organisational expectations. These individuals are often perceived as having more time and fewer personal obligations, leading to increased workloads and expectations to prioritise work over personal life.	Study findings are limited to single professionals in banking and medical careers (white-collar jobs).
Gao & Sai (2020)	Unspecified	Qualitative study (authors personal accounts)	Two single child-free female academics who live alone, UK	Single women living alone faced heightened social isolation, mental health challenges, and insufficient virtual connections during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Unspecified
Marutlulle (2020)	Intersectionality, Identity Theory, Gender Theory and Critical Diversity Theory	Qualitative study	Seven child-free female middle-class professionals, aged 33-72, South Africa	Black child-free women experienced negative stereotyping and bias based on reproductive choices, pressure to conform to group dynamics and forced camaraderie, being perceived as "always available", leading to increased workload without appropriate compensation or recognition and assumptions of immaturity and irresponsibility that restricted access to high-impact opportunities and leadership roles.	Small sample size
Verniers (2020)	Not applicable	Literature review	Review conducted in the US and, to a lesser extent, in Australia and European countries	Child-free women in the workplace face a unique form of backlash rooted in societal expectations about motherhood. These women are often stereotyped as less nurturing, less committed, or overly ambitious, which can lead to discrimination and exclusion.	Most of the reported studies focused on white, educated, heterosexual women, limiting generalisability.

Utoft (2020)	Unspecified	Qualitative study (authors personal account)	Single, childfree female academic	The author, a single, childless woman was often perceived as the “ideal” academic during the pandemic due to having fewer domestic responsibilities compared to her counterparts with children or other family obligation.	Unspecified
Dumas & Perry-Smith (2018)	Boundary Theory and Concerns Theory	Quantitative study (regression and multilevel structural equation modelling)	353 male and female of diverse family structures, average age of 36, US	Single, childless workers had lower work engagement than those with other family structures. Furthermore, single, childless workers expected fewer domestic tasks after work, leading to lower work engagement.	Survey data consisted of self-reported behaviours, potentially yielding common-method variance.
Wilkinson et al. (2018)	Organisational Justice Theory	Qualitative study	36 childless male and female professionals who live alone, aged 24-44, UK	Solo-living, childless professionals perceive work-life balance policies as inequitable, favouring parents and families over their needs.	Unspecified
Jacobs (2017)	Social Exchange Theory	Quantitative study (correlation, regression and mediation)	134 full-time male and female employees who were child-free, aged 22-62, South Africa	The availability and use of flexible work arrangements did not have a significant impact on organisational commitment. Instead, organisational commitment was influenced by a single dimension of the child-free-friendly culture scale: equal work expectations. Furthermore, perceived organisational support acted as a mediator, linking equal work expectations to higher levels of organisational commitment.	Limited ability to draw conclusion due to cross-sectional data.

Kim & Kim (2017)	Unspecified	Quantitative study (t-tests, linear regression, and hierarchical moderated regressions)	288 married and single female workers, aged 30-40, South Korea	There was no significant difference between married and childless single female workers in terms of how much work-life conflict they experienced or how committed they were to their organisation.	Limited ability to generalise and examine both married and single women's perceptions of the research variables of the study due to the cross-sectional nature.
Rick & Meisenbach (2017)	Unspecified	Qualitative study	10 voluntarily child-free men and women with working experience, aged 32-67, US	Child-free individuals often face stigmatisation in professional and social contexts, leading to challenges in work-life balance and identity negotiation.	Study demographics were homogenous in terms of race and class.
Wilkinson et al. (2017)	Organisational Justice Theory	Qualitative study	36 male and female solo-living managers and professionals, aged 25-44, UK	Child-free managers and professionals living alone face unique challenges in achieving work-life balance.	Unspecified
Munsch (2016)	Unspecified	Quantitative study (experiment)	653 male and female professionals, US	Child-free women were often disadvantaged when requesting flexible work arrangements, as they were perceived as less deserving of such accommodations compared to their colleagues with children.	Study findings are limited to professional workers.
Peterson & Engwall (2016)	Unspecified	Qualitative study	36 voluntarily childless women and men, aged 30-50+, Sweden	Participants supported family-focused policies and high taxes, emphasising their contributions to public services while rejecting 'free-rider' labels. However, they criticised misuse of benefits by some parents and noted that state subsidies, while addressing financial concerns, did not influence their decision to remain childless.	Small number of participating voluntarily childless men, limiting comparison between the experiences of voluntarily childless men and voluntarily childless women.

Trump-Steele et al. (2016)	Unspecified	Mixed-methods study	553 professional women with at least 3 years of working experience, aged 20-55	Women of childbearing age face workplace stigma, particularly surrounding potential pregnancy, impacting their professional opportunities and experiences.	The sample was predominantly white, failing to account for potential cultural variations in gender roles related to maternity that might influence the findings.
Casper et al. (2015)	Unspecified	Literature review	Unspecified	Single, child-free adults often have hidden caregiving responsibilities, such as supporting aging parents or extended family, which are overlooked in workplaces. Organisations frequently assume these individuals have fewer outside commitments, leading to biases in workload distribution.	Unspecified
Masebe & Ramosebudi (2015)	Second Demographic Transition (SDT)	Quantitative study	Women with a tertiary education, aged 20-49, South Africa	Childlessness is more prevalent amongst women with two or more university degrees and employed.	Study could not distinguish between different types of childlessness/child-freeness.
Dixon & Dougherty (2014)	Language Convergence/Meaning Divergence (LC/MD)	Qualitative study	60 LGBTQ and straight men and women, aged 19-65, USA	Childfree workers experienced simultaneous and paradoxical invisibility and hypervisibility. Traditional family was privileged, causing participants with alternative families to work around traditional family assumptions.	Study demographics were largely confined to white and middle-class individuals.
Jones (2014)	Unspecified	Qualitative study (synthesis of court cases and policies)	Unspecified (focuses on legal contexts and implications in the US)	Single and child-free individuals, particularly women, experience systemic workplace disadvantages due to societal norms that prioritise familial responsibilities.	Unspecified

Berdahl & Moon (2013)	Unspecified	Quantitative study (ANCOVA)	232 male and female parents and non-parents, aged 30-49, US	Women without children experience more harassment and mistreatment than mothers.	Limited ability to draw conclusion due to cross-sectional data.
Haar (2013)	Unspecified	Mixed-methods	1337 male and female parents and non-parents, New Zealand	Work–life balance was equally important across both samples, consistently influencing job and life satisfaction, as well as psychological outcomes. Work–life conflict had a detrimental effect, work–life enrichment proved beneficial, and work–life balance offered additional advantages, particularly enhancing life satisfaction.	Self-reported data collected at a single point of time resulting in potential for common method variance.
Engler et al. (2011)	Unspecified	Qualitative study	22 single, childless working women, aged 29-45, Canada	Single, childless women construct well-being as a dynamic balance between personal fulfilment and societal expectations, often navigating tensions related to their non-conforming status.	Unspecified
Casper & Swanberg (2009)	Unspecified	Qualitative study	37 single child-free male and female professionals, aged 25-59, US	Single child-free adults often experience unique stressors, including expectations of unlimited availability at work and limited organisational support for their personal needs.	Convenience sampling was used, which may have introduced bias and limited the diversity of the sample.

Appendix B

Semi-structured interview guide for the workplace experiences of child-free black women

Main interview questions

1. Can you start by telling me a bit about your job and what you do? How long you have been in this role?
    - Roles
    - Responsibilities
    - Working hours
    - Tell me about how important your job is to you?
        - What does work mean to you? How important?
        - How much time is spent per week?
        - Does this feel right?
    - Probing for more detail on significant elements of the story - including jobs, job change decisions, and career aspirations.

2. Can you tell me about your family and friends?
    - Probe around living arrangements
    - Probe around friends and family (importance and responsibilities)
    - Probe around upbringing – nuclear/single-parent household/extended family
    - Probe around educational background
    - Probe around living arrangement changes, decisions, and relationships
    - Probe around other influential factors e.g., religion/tradition/culture
    - Probe here about partners, intention to have children, female challenges etc.
    - What are your aspirations for being in a relationship? Do you want to have your own family one day?

3. Can you tell me about your other roles in life?

- What do you do outside of work?

4. Does one role hold higher priority over the other or do you feel that they are equally important to you?

5. What is your experience of managing all these roles in your day-to-day life?
    - Probe: Fully understand work and family roles - how much time goes into each

6. Can you please describe what an ordinary day in your life looks like?
    - Probe around experiences of being child-free
    - Probe around some benefits of being child-free in the workplace (financial stability, career advancement, greater autonomy, reduced stress, and responsibilities)

7. What are some of the challenges of being child-free in the workplace?
    - Probe: what helps to overcome these challenges? How could your org support your better? Policies, practices, interventions etc.
    - Can you describe any challenges you have faced when allocating time to spend on work and other activities?
    - Do you have support from work, family, friends, or your community/religious leaders to overcome these challenges?
        i. Job role/organisation influence on work-life balance (flexibility, control, mobility, WLB policies)
        ii. Industry/occupation influence on work-life balance

8. Are there ways in which you feel you are treated differently from colleagues who have children? Probe around the below issues without explicitly asking:
    - Are there any accommodations or flexibility that you feel that workers without children do not have?
    - Are you expected to attend functions after hours when colleagues who have children do not have to?

9. Do you have any additional thoughts related to improving workplace policies or practices to better assist child-free professionals in the workplace?
    - How do you envision the workplace being more inclusive and supportive of child-free women like yourself?

10. Do you think being a woman of colour makes the experiences you shared any different to white women? In what ways?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add that will assist me in better understanding your experience of being child-free and how you navigate this identity both in your personal life and at work? Do you have any questions for me? Is there anyone else you think I should talk to about this topic? If so, would you be willing to pass on the information about the study to them, along with my contact information?

Appendix C

Ethical clearance

2024/06/06

COM/00886/2024

RE: Research Ethics Committee Project Approval Letter

Dear Nadine Acheampong,

Your application for ethics review of your project titled

Beyond parenthood: Exploring the invisible identities of child-free black women in the South African workplace

has been reviewed and evaluated by the

Faculty of Commerce Research Ethics Committee (REC).

Based on the information supplied your application has been successful and is approved.

You may proceed with your research project.

Please note that should:

(i) any serious or adverse effects to participants occur and/or,

(ii) aspect(s) of your current project change and/or

(iii) any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project occur then you should immediately report this to the approving REC. You may be required to submit an amendment to this application, in order to determine whether the changed aspects increase the ethical risks of your project.

Please note the following additional conditions associated with this approval:

(i) * Note, this is a minor modification to already-approved ethics clearance COM/00784/2024

Regards,

School of Management Studies

Research Ethics Committee

Appendix D

Research study infographic

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!

Study criteria:

- Currently a voluntarily child-free woman (this does not exclude those who are open to future motherhood)
- African black, Coloured or Indian
- Between 25-38 years old
- In full-time paid employment for the last 2 years
- Living in South Africa

What is required of you?

- Participate in a semi-structured interview
- Interview will take approximately 60 minutes
- Interview will take place online or in-person (depending on your preference)

If you're interested in participating please contact me!

Researcher: Nadine Acheampong
Contact e-mail: ACHNAD001@myuct.ac.za

Supervisor: Feranaaz Farista
Contact e-mail: Feranaaz.Farista@uct.ac.za

The study has been granted ethical clearance from the University of Cape Town's Commerce Faculty Ethics Research Committee (COM/00784/2024)

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Hello,

My name is Nadine Acheampong, I am currently an Organisational Psychology Master's student at the University of Cape Town (UCT). I am conducting a study that seeks to understand the workplace experiences of black female professionals who are child-free. For my study, I am focusing on the experiences of women who have chosen not to have children, though this does not exclude those who may wish to have children in the future.

I would be most grateful for your help in considering being a study participant if you are female, between the ages of 25-38, identify as black (African black, Indian, Coloured), are currently voluntarily or temporarily child-free and based in South Africa. Your unique insights are invaluable in my efforts to promote greater workplace inclusivity for child-free women.

As part of the study, you will be required to complete an anonymous, semi-structured interview. It should take no longer than one hour to complete. Participation is voluntary and you will be able to withdraw from the research process at any point in time should you wish. Your name or any identifiers will not be used in the research and will not be shared with anyone.

In order to accurately capture your insights, I am seeking your consent for the interview to be audio recorded. The transcriptions of the audio recordings and the write-up of the research will use a pseudonym.

I will finalise the interview arrangements upon receipt of your consent to participate.

By signing this form, you are indicating that you have read and understand the information provided above and voluntarily agree to participate in the study. You are welcome to contact me, or my research supervisor, with any questions or concerns you may have. If you agree, kindly acknowledge in writing permission for me to interview you.

Sincerely,

Researcher: Nadine Acheampong

Contact e-mail: ACHNAD001@myuct.ac.za

Contact number: 0711932327

Supervisor: Feranaaz Farista

Contact e-mail: Feranaaz.farista@uct.ac.za

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F

Demographic and background information for data collection

Work role and educational information:

- What is your occupation?
- What industry do you work in?
- How many years of working experience do you have?
- Is your job face-to-face, hybrid or remote?
- What is your highest level of education?

Personal and family role information:

- What is your race?
- What is your gender?
- How old are you?
- What is your marital status?
- Do you have children?

Appendix G

Interview reflexivity table

Table 3

The main outcomes of employing reflexivity in the research process

Context of reflection	Trigger of reflexivity	Thinking about my own thinking	Outcomes of reflexivity
Interview 1	My performance in asking questions was not good	I observed my supervisor ask questions and probe and realised that I need to practice asking questions in a less rigid manner. I need to not bombard my participant with multiple questions at once. This resulted in this participant only responding to certain aspects of my questions instead of all the elements I was looking for. I also need to probe more around certain responses.	I need to probe by asking for example "how did this make you feel?" when participants share experiences that impacted them. Additionally, instead of saying "can you tell me whether you grew up in a cultural, spiritual, religious or traditional household?" I should ask one at a time.
Interview 1	Participant seemed unsure of some of the terminology I was using	As a researcher, I should not assume that because something makes sense to me, it will make sense to my participant.	I need to ensure that the language that I use is not too academic and technical for my participants to understand. I can tailor the way I ask certain things for example, instead of saying "what practices/interventions can your organisation implement to better assist you?", I can rather say "is there anything that you would want in your organisation as a child-free woman that could better assist you?"
Interview 2	I accidentally did not record the interview	As a researcher, I need to always ensure that all material needed for the interview is working beforehand. I also, need to ensure that I have a backup recording.	I need to check that the interview is recording before proceeding. Furthermore, I need to ensure that I have a backup recording in case. I will record all interviews going forward on MS Teams, Grain and my phone.

Interview 3	Power dynamics resulting in a lack of rapport	I had limited interaction with my participant prior to the interview as they were communicating through their secretary. The communication through their secretary, while necessary for logistical reasons, created a barrier to forming a personal connection. This made it difficult to establish rapport with the participant as we had not communicated at all prior to the interview. I wanted to tell the secretary that I needed to communicate directly with the participant but was told she was very busy. Given that this participant is quite senior in their organisation, I felt like I would be bothering them and thus decided to communicate through the secretary.	I will seek ways to establish better communication channels with participants before interviews, whether through informal conversations or more personalised outreach.
Interview 4	I seem to have preconceived ideas about my participants experiences	In contrast to other my other interviews, this participant had no challenges with her child-free identity in her personal or work-life. The interview lasted about 40 minutes (much shorter than the others I had). I left the interview thinking it was not ‘valuable’ because I had not gotten as much data as the others and nothing that aligned with the preconceived ideas I had of what data should be emerging.	I realised that this kind of thinking was extremely problematic and detrimental to my research. If anything, contrasting experiences enriches the study. As I researcher I need to remember that my participants experiences are subjective. I need to respect this and not overlook data simply because it does not align with other participants experiences or my own ‘ideas’. I need to work on probing around each participants individual experiences.
Interview 4	Perception of a lack of rapport	Participant was giving one-word answers and was not opening up. They did express that they are quite introverted. However, building rapport could have improved this.	I need to spend time before each interview building rapport with participants by using more ice-breaker questions to help put participants at ease. I also could have probed more to encourage the participant to open up more.

Interview 4	Technical issues	My power went out during the interview. Although this was beyond my control, it left me feeling quite flustered.	I need to remember to have contingencies in place for when issues like these arise. I need to make sure my laptop is fully charged prior to each interview and that I have data on my phone or modem that I can use to hotspot off of. Furthermore, this experience taught me to not be so self-critical as I cannot control everything. Rather, I need to be adaptable and flexible with the research process.
Interview 5	My performance in asking questions was not good as I was quite exhausted	I did not ask about how my participant felt about certain experiences. I also kept accidentally interrupting my participant as I thought they had finished speaking. I think I wanted to keep the conversation flowing and thus interrupted as I did not want 'awkward silences'. However, I need to embrace these silences as a natural part of interviews and allow participants space to fully articulate their thoughts.	I still seem to be struggling with probing. I need to ask participants to "tell me a little bit more about that" or "how did that make you feel". I also need to work on my active listening and give participants time to reflect on their responses in case they want to add on. I can ask "is there anything else you would like to add" just to make sure my participants say everything they need to before I move on to another question.
Interview 6	I was not clear enough when asking questions	My participant kept asking me to elaborate a bit more on my questions or what I meant by what I was asking.	I recognise that some questions may have been vague eg., "can you tell me about your family and friends?" in which the participant asked "what about them?". I wanted to keep the questions open ended however, I recognise that the lack of context might have made it difficult for participants to answer accordingly. Thus, I should be clearer and more precise when asking questions.

Interview 7	I was overthinking	As I has to re-do this interview, I was worried that the organic flow and authenticity of their responses were not going to be fully recaptured in the second attempt. I was trying to remember what was discussed, what I probed around and essentially trying to 'replicate' the first interview. In so doing, I felt like I was not fully paying attention to my participant but instead trying to ask the correct questions to get the same responses as the last time.	I need to walk into each interview being open and flexible with no expectations. No two interviews are ever going to be the same and each interview is a unique opportunity to explore new dimensions of the participant's experiences. Going forward, I will work on being more mindful in the moment, allowing the conversation to evolve organically without the pressure of expecting certain data or responses.
Interview 8	Perceived lack of empathy	My participant shared some sensitive information regarding her family, and I did not know what to say in that moment. I definitely felt uncomfortable. This is something I have always struggled with, I never want to say the wrong thing but also want to say something to make the personal feel better although I do know what the 'right' thing is. So, I just did not know how to respond in the moment.	I am aware of my own limitations in responding to sensitive situations. This is something I need to work on moving forward, I will make use of strategies to handle such situations with more confidence or simply say "I'm sorry you had that experience". In this I'm not trying to 'fix' anything but rather acknowledging and empathising with the participant.
Interview 9	Internet connectivity issues	There were internet connectivity issues. The connection froze a couple to times which prevented me from hearing this participant's answers. We tried to fix this during the interview, but it did not work. I found it quite frustrating and disruptive.	As a researcher, I should stress to my participants to ensure they have good internet connectivity prior to beginning the interview. I should check mine beforehand.
Interview 10	Lack of probing	My participant mentioned that her choice not to have kids was "personal". As an individual, I do not like to pry in people's personal lives but as a researcher and given that it was related to the context of the study, I should have probed around this.	Although I wanted to respect my participant's privacy. I realised that I was not doing my role as a researcher justice. I need to be better at finding ways to ask sensitive questions in a respectful and non-invasive manner, acknowledging participants' boundaries while gaining deeper insights into questions.

Interview 11	My performance in asking questions was not good	When asking questions, my participant asked me to elaborate on the question, she mentioned that the question was vague and that she did not understand what I meant.	I need to be clearer in the questions I ask and provide more context. I think this is a delicate balance I'm trying to strike. I am weary of my questions becoming 'leading' if I do make them more specific. At the same time, I need to ensure that participants understand the questions.
Interview 11	Power dynamics	This participant is an academic who has conducted a fair share of qualitative research before. I definitely went into the interview already feeling intimidated because of this. As they had been in my shoes and had experience in interviewing, I was worried that they would be judging me. I did feel this happening throughout the interview with the participant making remarks such as "when I read of the consent form it didn't tell me much about the actual study" and that my questions were "vague" and unclear. I felt like I was being critiqued and that my study was not well put together. I acknowledge that it was probably difficult for the participant to conduct the interview as a participant and not a researcher and that their 'researcher role' may have jumped out at times. Although there was no malice intended, these comments affected my confidence during the interview. I found myself second-guessing everything I said and did.	While the feedback was difficult to hear in the moment, it offered a valuable opportunity to reflect on areas for improvement, particularly in terms of clarity in my consent documents and interview questions. Furthermore, it taught me to remain composed and professional, even when faced with challenging situations. The participant's remarks about the consent form prompted me to revisit its content and ensure it provides a more comprehensive overview of the study for future participants.
Interview 12	Participant shared sensitive information which took a toll on me	This participant shared their experience of how they were sexually harassed in the workplace. Hearing this took a toll on me, I felt quite emotionally exhausted after the interview.	Conducting interviews is emotionally exhausting, something I honestly did not expect. I need to take time for myself in this process and seek appropriate support, whether through my supervisor, taking a break from interviews or mindfulness practices.

Interview 13	Interviewer fatigue	This is the 4th interview I've had in the space of 5 days. It has really taken a toll on me, and I feel like I'm unable to engage meaningfully with participants and listen actively.	I need to spread out my interviews to avoid this.
Interview 14	Data sufficiency reached	By the end of this interview, I knew I had sufficient data to answer my research question. I had interviewed a diverse sample and had varying experiences. Majority of the participants had provided in-depth responses to the questions.	I have already committed to 8 more interviews and still need to approach each interview with an open mind to what new data could possibly emerge. I will modify my interview guide to slightly to prioritise underexplored questions.
Interview 15	My age may be posing a barrier for participants to open up	When speaking about an experience this participant asked how old I was and when I told her my age, they stated I was young and probably had not experienced what she was referring to yet. This made me feel as though my age and inexperience were creating a barrier and preventing this participant from being able to open up and feeling like they could be understood.	This is something that is out of control and I need to realise that my participants experiences are their own. I need to be able to create a space in which participants feel free to share irrespective of our differences.eg., building rapport and actively listening and acknowledging their unique experiences.
Interview 16	The participant tended to deviate from the topic	I felt as though I should have steered the interview a bit more as I felt the conversation deviated from the topic at times. However, I am cognizant that this interview created a space in which my participant felt free to share openly so I was wary of how disrupting or steering would detract from this and change the openness of the interview.	I need to be able to redirect participants to the topic at hand whilst still creating a space for participants to share openly. I could have acknowledged what they shared and thanked them for that and then say "You know XXX, I would like to find out more about…".

Interview 17	Issues with internet connectivity	I noticed at the beginning of the interview that the internet connection was not great so we both checked our connectivity and things seemed to be fine. However, throughout the interview, there were times when the connection would freeze, and I would not be able to hear what was being said.	In the event of this, I will ask the participant to switch off their camera to see if the connection will improve. Although I will not be able to take note of non-verbal cues, this might facilitate a clearer conversation.
Interview 18	Unable to see participant's body language	The camera froze during the interview for an extended period of time. When this happened, I felt emotionally disconnected from the participant, which affected the natural flow of the conversation. I also found myself more focused on the technical problem than on actively listening to their words, which added to my sense of detachment.	I need to realise that these are issues that come with doing online interviews. Instead of being fixated on the issue I will adapt accordingly and use various strategies to maintain connection even in the absence of visual cues. For example, emphasising verbal affirmations, summarising what the participant has said, and asking clarifying questions.
Interview 19	Thinking about participant's racial identity as a mixed-race woman	This participant identified as mixed-race, being half white and half Coloured. Since my inclusion criteria specified "African Black," "Coloured," and "Indian" individuals, the participant expressed uncertainty about whether they fully met these criteria. Although they stated they were comfortable being identified as Coloured in the absence of a mixed-race category, I felt conflicted about including them, as I did not want to compromise or erase their self-identified mixed-race identity.	This highlighted the complexity of working with identity categories in research. While inclusion criteria provide focus to a study, it may inadvertently oversimplify or exclude the nuanced ways people self-identify. This participant's willingness to adapt their identity to fit the criteria reflects the fluidity of identity, but it also underscores the ethical responsibility I have as a researcher to ensure that my participants feel respected and authentically represented.
Interview 19	Data saturation reached	I had suspected I was reaching data saturation, but this interview confirmed it. There are no new novel insights that are emerging. All relevant aspects of the phenomenon under study have been explored.	As I have already committed to 3 more interviews, I should rather focus on interview questions where I felt the responses lacked depth.

Interview 20	Unable to see participant's body language	I felt quite annoyed and frustrated doing this interview. The participant conducted the interview while driving home because of this their camera was off so I could not see them and observe their body language so there was a lack of rapport. Furthermore, because they were driving the connection was bad and they were also unable to fully devote their attention to the interview. They were giving one-word answers which made it difficult to have a meaningfully engaging interview. However, upon reflection, I soon realised that my frustrations were rooted in privilege. Many of my participants expressed experiencing time-poverty and this was one such example of that. I realised that I felt entitled to this participant's time yet she was doing her very best with her time and circumstances to assist me.	Instead of having expectations of how interviews should unfold, I should adapt to the lived realities of participants.
Interview 21	Participant tended to deviate from the topic	At certain times, this participant tended to digress from the topic because I was trying my best to actively listen, I too would end up getting sidetracked and forgetting what I had asked in the first instance.	I should write down my train of thought in my notebook as I conduct the interview
Interview 22	There were a lot of disruptions during the interview	The participant conducted the interview while at work. People were talking in the background, and the participant was repeatedly interrupted, ultimately moving into a storeroom to continue the conversation. Although these disruptions disturbed the flow of the interview, I felt bad that they had to resort to such uncomfortable conditions to accommodate the interview.	I realised the importance of being flexible and accommodating when scheduling interviews. I should have emphasised when scheduling interviews that they are done during a time and setting that ensures privacy and comfort for participants. However, I once again acknowledge that this scenario could speak to the time poverty that child-free women experience, and I am grateful that this participant made the time to speak with me.

Interview 23	Did not get to finish asking all the questions	This participant was pressed for time and had to leave after an hour even though there was so much more that needed to be discussed. I grappled with the idea of asking for another day and time in which we could continue with the interview however, I felt guilty for asking as I felt like all my participants had already generously given their time and asking for more would just be too much.	I could have emailed the participant the pressing questions I had or asked them to send me a voice note and asked them to respond when they had time.

Note. This table format was taken from Reflexivity in research: Promoting rigour, reliability and validity in qualitative research (p.566) by Darawsheh, 2014, International journal of therapy and rehabilitation.

Appendix H

Initial coding scheme

Table 4

Initial coding scheme

Code name	References
Awareness around what it means to be a parent	9
Being a social parent	2
Importance of relationships	18
Cultural identity	6
Societal expectations around child-bearing	11
Traditional gender roles	10
Family prioritises education despite finances	1
Believes there's still time for children	1
Self-pressure to have children	2
Does not abide by societal expectations	2
Questions around child-free status creates discomfort	4
Marriage cultural practices	2
Feelings of resentment for not having a child	1
No managerial pressure around children	1
Workplace assumptions around marriage	1
Being content with child-free identity	4
Child-free identity as taboo	1
Feelings of guilt around child-free status	2
Decisions around having kids	19
Non-traditional gender roles	1
Has family responsibilities	2
Guilt around not having time for relationships	1
Workplace does not understand that family goes beyond nuclear ideals	26
Upbringing created a fear around pregnancy	1
Family expectations around child-bearing	24
Guilt to have children	2
Child-free status intrusion creates feelings frustration	4
Not having religious affiliation	3
Generational differences in having children	10
Thinking around biological clock	3
No immediate work-family pressures	1
Mom became a stay-at-home mom	2
Gender roles in upbringing	5

Religious identity is central	16
Shifting perceptions around marriage	1
Global North cultures differ from Global South cultures	4
Cultural identity conflicts with workplace norms	5
Humble upbringing	2
Family responsibility leave gets forfeited as a child-free worker	10
Growing up in disciplined household	2
Desire for marriage and kids	11
No family pressure to get married	2
Judgement from friends around being child-free	4
Religious pressure to get married	4
Importance of waiting for marriage	2
Generational differences in upbringing	15
Maturing and preparing for the future	1
Female family members encouraging self-sufficiency	1
Family pressure to succeed	1
Generational differences in the workplace	4
Family do not shame child-free identity	10
Family pressure to get married	5
Life did not turn out as anticipated	2
Child-free due to circumstance	1
No workplace questions around familial relations	1
Complicated family relationship	1
Pressure to have kids affects self-confidence	1
Coping with child-free identity	11
Spiritual identity is central	4
Guilt to get married	2
Prioritising relationship with ageing parents	4
Work identity	10
Work as a means to support family	7
Support structures	3
Desired support	15
Importance of positive work relationships	2
Importance of having a positive workplace environment	5
Lack of appropriate reporting structures and support	1
Importance of growth and continuous learning	2
Importance and desire for rest and recovery	9
Lack of managerial support to manage work demands	3
Lack of awareness around family responsibility leave	1
Recommendations - mentorship for intersectional identities	6
Recommendation - female representation matters	5
Intentional about not working on weekends	8

Recommendation - self-care leave	6
Desire for workplace seniority	1
Recommendation - need for therapy	1
Recommendation - lack of policy implementation for child-free workers	5
Investing in well-being results in positive organisational outcomes	1
Recommendation - need for wellness day	5
Recommendation - organisational awareness around leave	2
Recommendation - period leave	6
Recommendation - more socialisation	2
Recommendation - pay parity and transparency	1
Recommendation - acknowledge diverse family structures	1
Importance of work-life balance	4
Manager is understanding of family dynamics	2
Recommendation - awareness around diverse family structures	1
Recommendation - sensitivity training for management	1
Work-life priorities	4
Prioritising education	2
Prioritises time alone	3
Prioritising work now to balance future demands	1
Shifting mindsets around work	1
Uncertainty around career	3
Priorities are constantly shifting	5
Family prioritises career	3
Career prioritises family	1
Work and relationships are of equal priority	3
Friends prioritise family	2
Child-free benefits	15
Child-free challenges	6
Child-free identity creates feelings of exclusion in workplace	7
Assumptions about child-free workers	15
Workplace accommodations for parents	12
Child-free identity gets neglected in the workplace	2
Influence of industry on experiences of child-free workers	5
Flexible working hours	17
Taking time to relax after work	1
Work busy but reasonable	1
Work life balance	5
Perceived lack of discrimination around being child-free in the workplace	10
Role does not align for work-life balance	6
Difficulty in compartmentalising and prioritising work	1

Flexible working can create challenges	3
Flexibility creates opportunities	16
Difficulty in work-life balance	15
Balancing work perks and work-time	2
Prioritising life outside work	3
Assumptions around availability	21
Work as demanding	22
Setting boundaries in the workplace	12
Work distribution needs to evenly distributed	2
Hybrid working mode enhances family time	5
Child-free means work can be prioritised more	1
Not being equal in team (workload)	2
Difficulty to prioritise work and family and friends	6
Having to be mindful of workers with children	3
Being child-free means financial freedom	9
Child-free workers seen as less deserving of salary	4
Stigma and fear about taking time off work	2
Anticipated work-family conflict	4
Workplace is accommodating to all	10
Work is not demanding	4
Hybrid working allows for flexibility	2
Positive work environment creates opportunity to go the extra mile	1
No personal discussions at work create positive working environment	1
Being child-free means autonomy	2
Workplaces questions around child-free status	4
Child-free is perceived as being less responsible	2
Flexibility is limited	3
Being child-free means you need to work harder	1
Perceptions around not having any responsibilities being child-free	15
No consideration for lives of child-free workers	2
Work extends to weekends	2
Fear around taking time off	1
Class privileges	10
Negative workplace experiences a young woman of colour	2
Harassment as a woman of colour	2
Harassment as a young female worker	3
Initial start to career as all encompassing	7
Having a junior role makes you more vulnerable in organisations	18
Expectations around race in the workplace	1
Being a black woman makes it easier to be manipulated	1

Racial discrimination in the workplace	5
Women of colour have challenging experiences	8
Important to bring discussions into workplace	1
Social class - link to class, culture and social identity	5
Being a minority in the workplace	1
Intersectional identity undermines women in the workplace	22
Young women of colour experience imposter syndrome	2
Being treated differently to white counterpart	1
Intersectionality as a black woman	12
Difficult upbringing	2
Intersectionality of location	6
Importance of speaking up as a woman of colour	1
Blurred lined between church and family	1
Children are involved in mature family discussions	2
Finance industry is bias against female workers	1
Gendered discrimination in the workplace	3
Intersectional identity as a child-free individual	6
Being underprepared for how identity would impact life	2
Representation as a black woman in an organisation	3
Class disadvantages - long difficult time-consuming commute	2
DEI in the workplace is ineffective	3
Being a black woman means you need to worker harder	2
Being a woman in the workplace is challenging	3
No gender discrimination in workplace	4
The importance of remaining authentic	3
No racial discrimination in workplace	4
Impact of work environment on mental health	1
Mental health comes before career aspirations	1
Navigating menstruation while working	1
Impact of unconducive work environment	1
Menstruation at work is challenging	8
Feels comfortable discussing women’s health issues in the workplace	1
Undergoing fertility treatment for future parenthood	3
Undergoing fertility treatment while working is difficult	2
Fertility treatment as taboo	2
Topic of family and kids is taboo in workplace	1
Menstruation as taboo	2
Interest in study	4
Sense of autonomy in workplace	2
Work environment affects career satisfaction	1
Tries to make time for family and partner	1

Pressure to be outspoken in the workplace	1
Workplace culture of rest and recovery	1
Importance of self-care	7
Importance of personal time	2
Work as a source of career advancement	2
Toxic work culture of speaking up	4
Intentional about how time is spent	5
Workplace culture of performance	7
Remote working is lonely	1
Work and child-free identity entails sacrificing relationships	3
Working in mining means you need to be tough	2
Indirectly compensated for demanding work	1
Being in a queer relationship feels balanced	1
No workplace questions around child-free status	2
Frustration around assumptions about child-free workers	1
Feeling unable to speak up as a child-free worker	1
Efforts are appreciated as a child-free worker	1
Family prioritises work	1
Importance of financial freedom	1

Appendix I

Final coding scheme

Table 5

Final coding scheme

Name	References
Awareness around what it means to be a parent	10
Being a social parent	2
Societal expectations around childbearing	11
Traditional gender roles	11
Family prioritises education despite finances	1
Self-pressure to have children	2
Does not abide by societal expectations	2
Questions around child-free status creates discomfort	4
Marriage cultural practices	3
No managerial pressure around children	1
Workplace assumptions around marriage	1
Guilt around child-free status	7
Decisions around having kids	22
Has family responsibilities	2
Workplace does not understand that family goes beyond nuclear ideals	29
Upbringing created a fear around pregnancy	1
Family expectations around childbearing	26
Child-free status intrusion creates feelings frustration	4
Not having religious affiliation	3
Thinking around biological clock	3
Gender roles in upbringing	5
Religious identity is central	16
Global North cultures differ from Global South cultures	4
Cultural identity conflicts with workplace norms	5
Humble upbringing	2
Family responsibility leave gets forfeited as a child-free individual	12
Growing up in disciplined household	2
Desire for marriage and kids	11
No family pressure to get married	3
Judgement from friends around being child-free	4
Religious pressure to get married	4
Generational differences in upbringing	21
Maturing and preparing for the future	1

Female family members encouraging self-sufficiency	1
Family pressure to succeed	1
Generational differences in the workplace	4
Family do not shame child-free identity	10
Family pressure to get married	5
Life did not turn out as anticipated	2
Child-free due to circumstance	1
No workplace questions around familial relations	1
Pressure to have kids affects self-confidence	1
Coping with child-free identity	16
Spiritual identity is central	4
Topic of family and kids is taboo in workplace	1
Work and child-free identity entails sacrificing relationships	4
Importance of community	6
Importance of family	28
Importance of friends	23
Gendered cultural pressures	5
Importance of ethnic cultures	4
Personal benefits of child-free identity	22
Prioritising relationship with ageing parents	4
Work as a means to support family	7
Work as a source of career advancement	2
Work as all consuming	8
Work as fulfilling	14
Ideal worker	18
Work as a source of income	11
Support structures	3
Desired support	15
Importance of positive work relationships	2
Importance of having a positive workplace environment	6
Importance of growth and continous learning	2
Importance and desire for rest and recovery	11
Lack of managerial support to manage work demands	4
Lack of awareness around family responsibility leave	1
Recommendations - mentorship for intersectional identities	6
Recommendation - female representation matters	5
Intentional about not working on weekends	8
Recommendation - self-care leave	6
Desire for workplace seniority	1
Recommendation - need for therapy	1
Recommendation - lack of policy implementation for child-free workers	8

Investing in well-being results in positive organisational outcomes	1
Recommendation - need for wellness day	5
Recommendation - organisational awareness around leave	2
Recommendation - period leave	6
Recommendation - more socialisation	2
Recommendation - pay parity and transparency	1
Recommendation - acknowledge diverse family structures	2
Importance of work-life balance	4
Manager is understanding of family dynamics	2
Recommendation - sensitivity training for management	1
Work-life priorities	16
Prioritising education	2
Prioritises time alone	9
Prioritising work now to balance future demands	1
Uncertainty around career	3
Priorities are constantly shifting	6
Child-free identity creates feelings of exclusion in workplace	9
Assumptions about child-free workers	19
Workplace accommodations for parents	16
Influence of industry on experiences of child-free workers	7
Flexible working hours	17
Sense of autonomy in workplace	2
Work life balance	5
Perceived lack of discrimination around being child-free in the workplace	10
Flexible working can create challenges	3
Flexibility creates opportunities	16
Difficulty in work-life balance	22
Balancing work perks and work-time	2
Assumptions around availability	24
Pressure to be outspoken in the workplace	1
Work as demanding	25
Setting boundaries in the workplace	14
Work distribution needs to evenly distributed	2
Hybrid working mode enhances family time	5
Not being equal in team (workload)	2
Having to be mindful of workers with children	3
Toxic work culture of speaking up	4
Being child-free means financial freedom	9
Child-free workers seen as less deserving of salary	4
Stigma and fear about taking time off work	4
Anticipated work-family conflict	4

Workplace culture of performance	7
Workplace is accommodating to all	10
Work is not demanding	4
Hybrid working allows for flexibility	2
Positive work environment creates opportunity to go the extra mile	1
No personal discussions at work create positive working environment	1
Being child-free means autonomy	2
Workplace questions around child-free status	4
Child-free is perceived as being less responsible	2
Flexibility is limited	4
Being child-free means you need to work harder	2
Perceptions around not having any responsibilities being child-free	16
No consideration for lives of child-free workers	2
Work extends to weekends	2
No workplace questions around child-free status	2
Feeling unable to speak up as a child-free worker	2
Efforts are appreciated as a child-free worker	2
Work benefits with child-free identity	4
Extra work demands as child-free individual	9
Workers with children given more accommodations	19
Workplace conversations centred around children	6
Workplace expectations being child-free	17
Time poverty	3
Social class	19
Harassment as a woman of colour	2
Harassment as a young female worker	3
Initial start to career as all encompassing	7
Having a junior role makes you more vulnerable in organisations	19
Racial discrimination in the workplace	7
Women of colour have challenging experiences	24
Important to bring discussions into workplace	1
Intersectional identity undermines women in the workplace	22
Young women of colour experience imposter syndrome	2
Intersectionality of location	6
Importance of speaking up as a woman of colour	1
Blurred lined between church and family	1
Children are involved in mature family discussions	2
Intersectional identity as a child-free individual	7
Being underprepared for how identity would impact life	3
Representation as a black woman in an organisation	3
DEI in the workplace is ineffective	3

Being a woman in the workplace is challenging	6
No gender discrimination	4
The importance of remaining authentic	3
No racial discrimination	4
Lighter skinned women of colour face less discrimination in the workplace	3
Impact of work environment on mental health	1
Mental health comes before career aspirations	1
Impact of unconducive work environment	1
Menstruation at work is challenging	9
Feels comfortable discussing women's health issues in the workplace	1
Undergoing fertility treatment for future parenthood	3
Undergoing fertility treatment while working is difficult	2
Fertility treatment as taboo	2
Menstruation as taboo	2
Interest in study	5
Intentional about how time is spent	5

Appendix J

Thematic maps

Figure 1

The availability paradox: Navigating time and identity in child-free lives

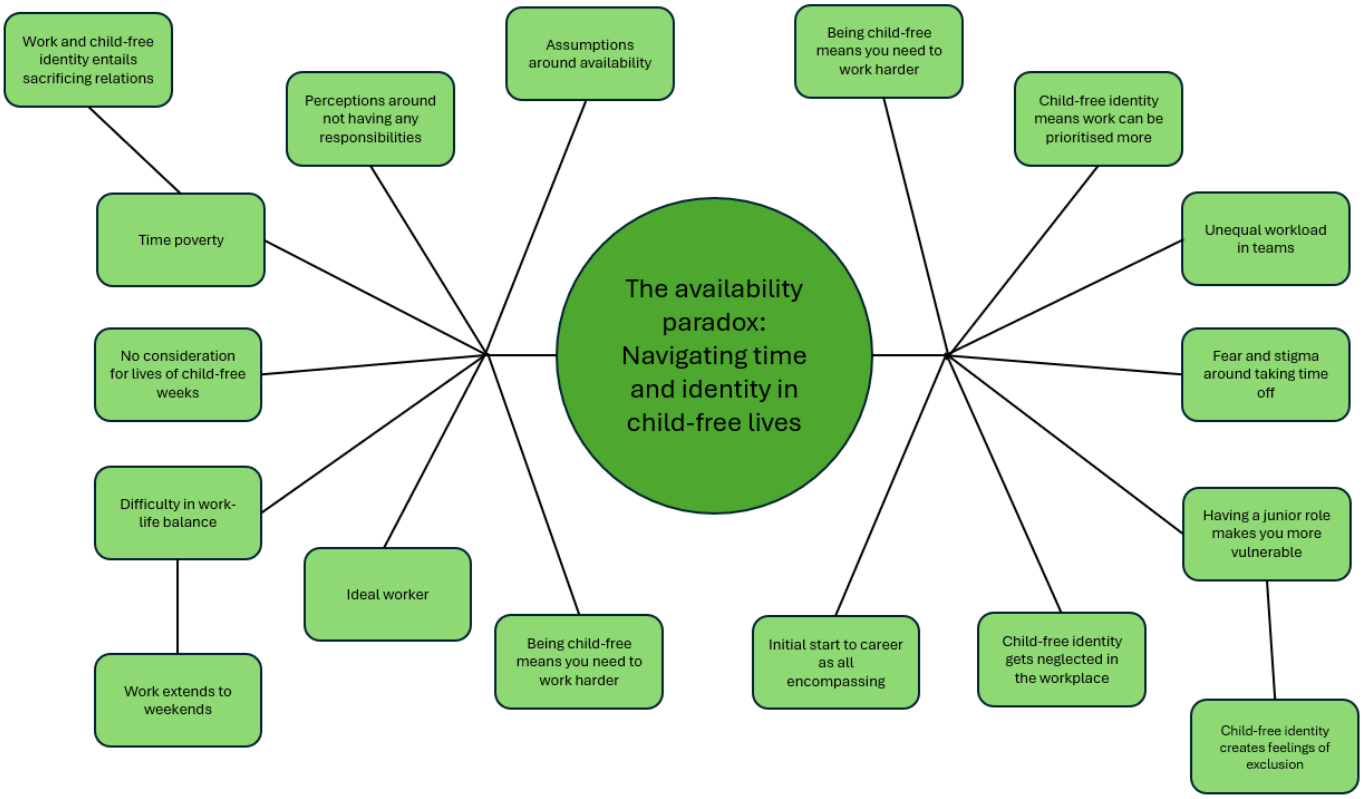

Figure 2

Redefining family at work: Child-free identities within organisational norms

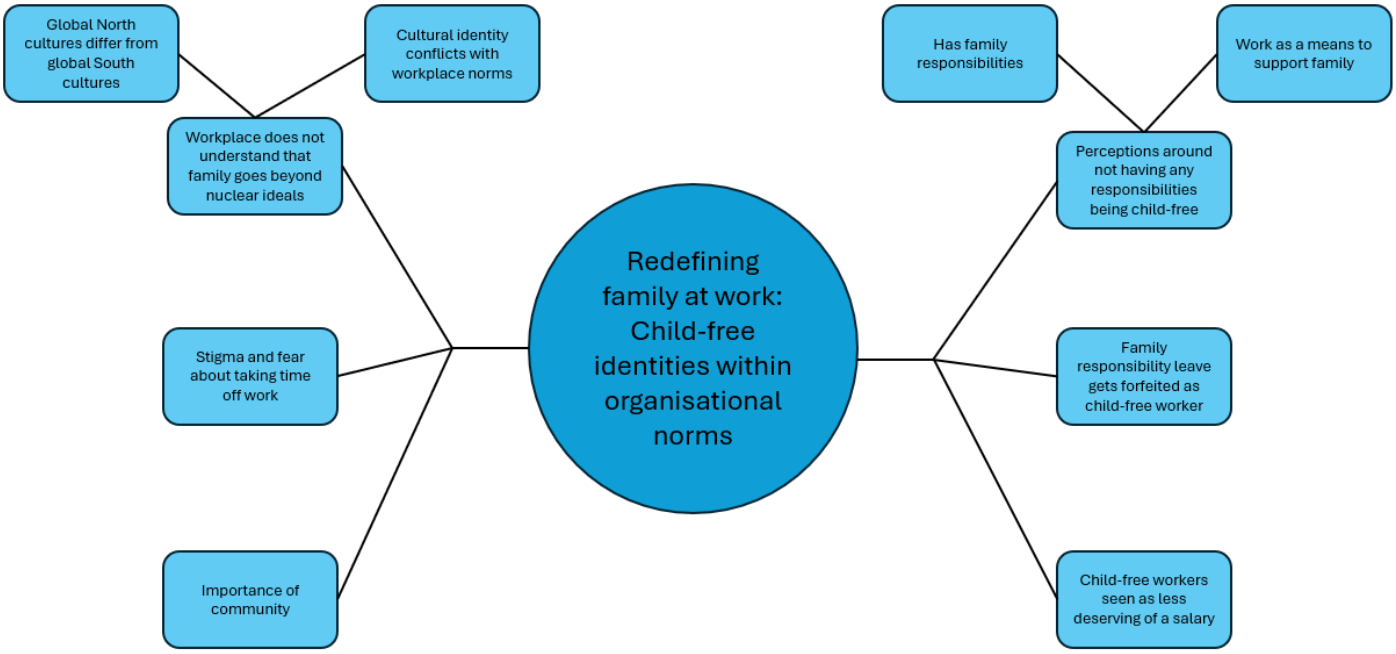

Figure 3

Unseen needs: Fostering inclusive spaces for child-free workers

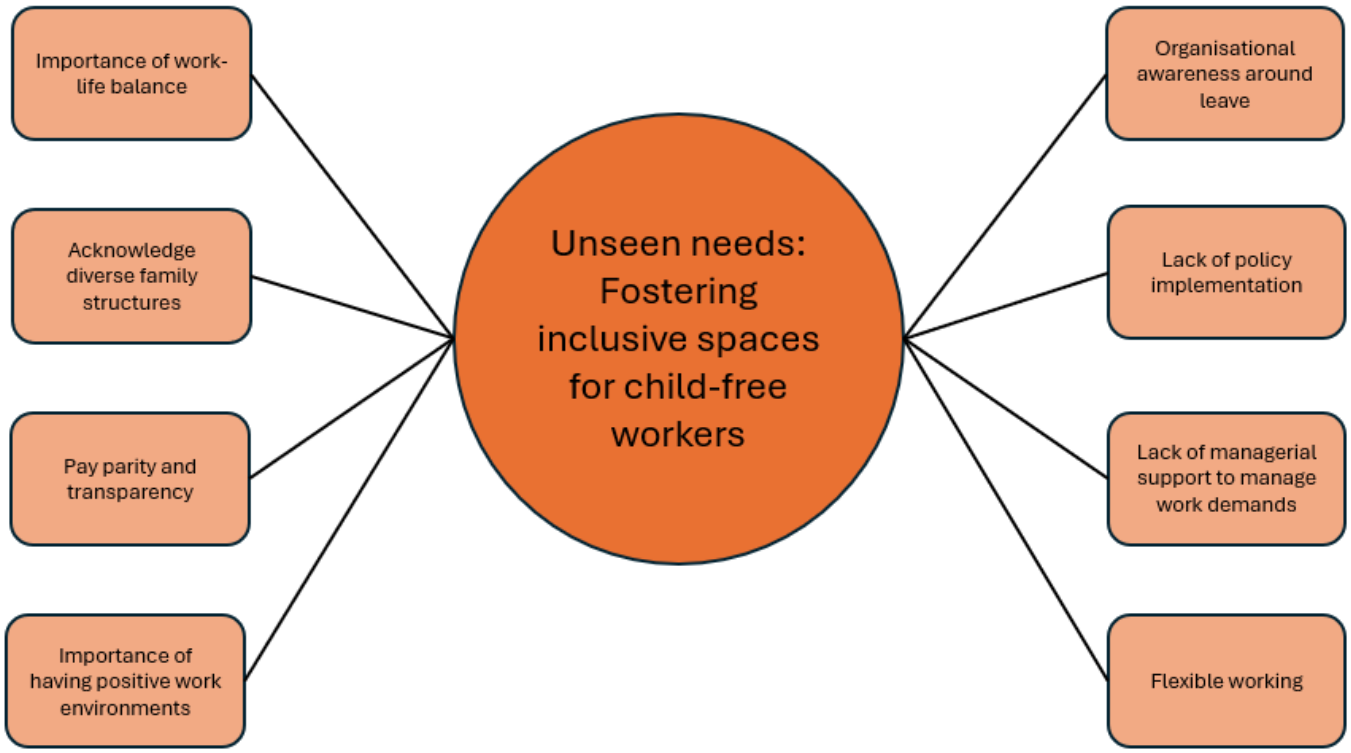

Figure 4

Relationship between themes

Appendix K

List of theme names

Table 6

Themes that emerged from the thematic analysis

Name of Theme	References
The availability paradox: Navigating time and identity in child-free lives	284
Redefining family at work: Child-free identities within organisational norms	291
Unseen needs: Fostering inclusive spaces for child-free workers	99

[1] The term 'black' is an inclusive term encompassing racially classified population groups, including coloureds, Indians, and Africans during apartheid South Africa (Manzo 1998, p. 107)

[2] For the purpose of the study, the term ‘child-free’ is defined as being voluntarily (those who choose not to have children), and temporarily without children (those who do not presently have children, but plan to in the future) (Bays, 2017; Verniers, 2020).

[3] The term ‘white collar’ is used to refer to employment that typically involves professional, managerial, or administrative work, often performed in an office or other non-manual environments. These jobs are characterised by intellectual labour rather than physical labour and usually require higher education or specialised skills (Seekings & Nattrass, 2008). White-collar jobs in South Africa are commonly associated with middle- to upper-income groups, but there remains significant racial disparity in access to such roles due to the legacy of apartheid, which limited educational and employment opportunities for the majority of the population (Seekings & Nattrass, 2008).