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NEGOTIATING EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN MARRIAGE: GENDERED POWER AND SUPPORT IN SOUTH AFRICAN HOUSEHOLDS

*¹Humphrey Lephetho Motsepe, ²Sheperd Sikhosana

¹Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Towoomba Research Centre), Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA) and University of Venda, South Africa

²University of Azteca, Mexico and Higherway Institute of Learning, South Africa

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*Corresponding Author: Humphrey Lephetho Motsepe

Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Towoomba Research Centre), Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA) and University of Venda, South Africa.

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ABSTRACT:

This conceptual article examines how couples in South African marriages negotiate educational aspirations and the emotional labour associated with gendered expectations and power dynamics in the home. Drawing on existing literature and qualitative insights, it explores a situation in which a husband, as breadwinner, aspires to further his education, while his stay-at-home wife or housewife resists academic advancement in favour of more immediate emotional attention. The study articulates how traditional gender roles, resource control, and emotional responsibilities interact to create tension and conflict. Using feminist and relational power theories, the paper unpacks how emotional labour becomes a tool in negotiating support, recognition, and identity within the union. The findings suggest that while financial support is offered, emotional resentment and competing time demands can undermine educational aspirations. Implications include the need for more open spousal communication, renegotiation of roles, and supportive institutional structures (such as flexible study options) to facilitate mutual growth. Future research should empirically investigate these dynamics through in-depth interviews or longitudinal designs. The paper contributes to understandings of intra-household power in gendered contexts of education, care, and personal development.

KEYWORDS: Emotional labour, Educational aspirations, Gendered expectations, Power dynamics, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Household relationships in South Africa continue to be shaped by longstanding gender expectations that influence how couples manage their roles, ambitions, and emotional responsibilities. Even though access to higher education has improved for both men and women, particularly over the last decade, patterns of domestic inequality remain embedded in daily life. Research shows that while women increasingly pursue formal education and participate in the labour market, they still carry a disproportionate share of emotional and domestic duties, often without reciprocal recognition (Makhanye & Moodley, 2022). These dynamics surface clearly in marriages where partners must negotiate personal aspirations alongside shared responsibilities, especially when education becomes a point of negotiation. In many homes, decisions about who studies, who works, and who sacrifices for the family reflect deeper questions about power and identity. Studies on household decision-making indicate that educational opportunities often intersect with norms about masculinity, femininity, and authority, which can either support or restrict advancement in subtle ways (Gibson & Claassen, 2023). This is particularly visible in situations where a husband intends to further his studies while his wife, who is a full-time homemaker, expresses resistance or discomfort. The tension does not simply stem from conflicting schedules but from differing expectations about emotional availability, support, and the meaning each partner attaches to education.

In this scenario, the husband may feel justified in pursuing academic development because he already contributes financially and offers to support his wife should she also wish to study. However, the wife may interpret his decision through a relational lens, worrying that his time and attention will be diverted from the marriage. Emotional labour, which refers to the effort required to manage feelings, maintain harmony, and provide reassurance within intimate relationships, often falls disproportionately on women (De Wet & Adebayo, 2021). When this labour is threatened or unbalanced, conflict becomes more likely. At the same time, education remains one of the strongest predictors of employment prospects and social mobility in South Africa. Recent national research continues to highlight how higher qualifications improve access to stable employment and increase household resilience (HSRC, 2024). For this reason, pursuing further studies is not merely a personal choice but a

strategic decision that may benefit the entire family. Yet despite this, the home continues to function as a site where patriarchal patterns can influence how educational opportunities are distributed and whose ambitions are prioritised. Scholars argue that such dynamics persist because cultural norms continue to position men as providers and women as primary caregivers, even in modern households (Khosa-Nkatini, Buqa, & Machimana, 2023).

These tensions reveal that educational aspirations are never negotiated in a vacuum. They are embedded within broader social narratives about gender, authority, love, and duty. When one partner becomes financially dominant, the other may develop a form of emotional dependence that complicates efforts to renegotiate household routines. Recent studies on marital power illustrate that financial contributions often shape decision-making authority, sometimes unintentionally limiting the autonomy of the financially dependent partner (Mathe & Radebe, 2022). In cases where the wife is a full-time homemaker, her reliance on emotional connection as a primary source of value within the relationship may intensify whenever changes threaten the emotional equilibrium. Understanding these dynamics is important for scholars and practitioners who work on gender, family studies, and relational wellbeing. The negotiation of education within households sheds light on how intimate relationships reproduce or challenge existing inequalities. It also offers insight into how couples balance ambition with care, and how emotional labour becomes a tool for influencing or resisting change. The growing body of literature on intra-household bargaining suggests that when educational aspirations clash with established emotional routines, partners often draw on available forms of power to assert their preferences, whether through finances, emotional labour, or cultural expectations (Ramudzuli & Kekana, 2023).

Given this context, the objective of this article is to examine conceptually how emotional labour and educational aspirations intersect within marriages where one spouse holds greater financial authority and the other expresses a stronger emotional reliance. The aim is to deepen understanding of the subtle negotiations that occur when partners' goals diverge, especially in gendered relationships influenced by historical and cultural norms. By unpacking these interactions, the article seeks to highlight areas where couples may require support and to propose themes for future empirical research.

The study is guided by three key questions. The first asks how gendered norms relating to emotional labour and control of resources shape the negotiation of educational ambitions within marriage. The second explores how power dynamics appear when one partner offers

financial support for the other's studies, raising questions about reciprocity and influence. The third considers which structures or relational practices might help couples navigate study-related decisions in ways that promote fairness, emotional wellbeing, and shared growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Roles and Power in South African Households

Gender roles in South African households continue to be deeply rooted in tradition, culture, and structural inequalities. Despite shifts in formal legislation, customary and patriarchal norms still frame men as the breadwinners and women as caregivers, a dynamic that plays out in decisions about education, finances, and emotional labour. In their theological and psychological analysis of black South African families, Khosa-Nkatini, Buqa, and Machimana (2023) argue that even as some women gain more access to leadership and economic opportunities, many households still operate under the assumption that men should hold primary authority. They note that “gender role changes in African households” present persistent “challenges to theology and psychology,” because traditional cultural conceptions of authority are deeply embedded in daily interactions, decision-making, and self-conception (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023). Empirical demographic evidence supports the argument that household structures in South Africa are evolving, but not always in ways that dismantle patriarchal power. A recent study using national census data from 1991 to 2022 found a marked decline in average household size and a significant rise in female-headed households—from about 30 percent in 1991 to around 50 percent in 2022 (China Population and Development Studies, 2024). Although the increase in female-headed households might suggest greater autonomy for women, it also often reflects economic strain, migration, and the legacy of apartheid-era social restructuring (turn0search15). It does not uniformly reflect a power shift within the traditional two-parent married household. Indeed, cultural norms continue to mediate how authority is exercised within intimate partnerships, sometimes obscuring the influence of women even when they head their households. Power imbalances in marriage translate into how spouses negotiate not just daily chores, but also long-term ambitions such as further education. In many South African communities, especially in more traditional or township settings, women's voices in household decision-making remain marginalized (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023). These communities often maintain the expectation that a wife should defer to her husband's wishes, including when it comes to participating in or supporting educational opportunities. This deferral reflects structural patriarchy: men are

expected to be the primary decision-makers, with more socioeconomic leverage, while women may rely on relational and emotional influence, rather than on direct control of resources.

These minimalist decisions about authority are made more complex by economic realities. Many households face financial strain, unemployment, and inequality, all of which intersect with gender in profound ways. Financial instability can heighten masculine pressure to provide and reduce men's ability to cede control. In extreme cases, financial dependence can make women vulnerable, not only economically but also psychologically, as they may lack the means to assert their own aspirations without jeopardizing relational stability (Mudimeli & Khosa-Nkatini, 2024; Naicker, 2025). For instance, the cultural dynamics of gender-based violence in South Africa are closely linked to entrenched gender roles: when men feel their provider status is threatened or when women attempt to re-negotiate traditional power patterns, the risk of conflict, including intimate partner violence, increases (Mudimeli & Khosa-Nkatini, 2024; Naicker, 2025). Moreover, the evolving role of men in caregiving and fatherhood adds another layer of negotiation. The State of South Africa's Fathers (SOSAF) 2024 report reveals that fatherhood is changing: many fathers remain absent from households, and only a fraction of children live with their biological fathers (only 35.6 percent, according to the report) (AHRI, 2025). This fragmentation of traditional family structures complicates power dynamics: in some cases, men have limited day-to-day involvement in their children's lives, reducing their emotional stake in domestic negotiations, while in others, their presence carries symbolic weight in maintaining patriarchal authority. Together, these dynamics illustrate that even as formal gender equality advances, the lived realities of power within households remain contested. Resistance to women's greater agency, whether in education, work, or leadership, persists through everyday emotional and relational mechanisms. To understand how educational aspirations and support are negotiated in marriage, one must therefore situate them within these broader structural and cultural patterns of gendered power.

Emotional Labour and Marital Relationships

The concept of emotional labour, originally developed in organizational sociology, refers to the effort involved in managing not only one's own emotions but also those of others, in order to sustain social harmony or achieve relational goals. Although much of the literature has focused on women in the workplace, recent scholarship in South Africa points to parallels

in domestic life, where emotional labour is often gendered and central to marital power dynamics. In a recent study of women in leadership roles in South Africa, Beharrie and Mabitsela (2023) uncover how women regularly suppress their own emotions, manage others' feelings, and perform emotional intelligence in order to navigate both professional and relational expectations. Their phenomenological research reveals that women managers describe leading through emotions, carefully calibrating expressions of feeling so as not to fall into stereotypes or be judged less competent. They also report a spillover into domestic life: emotional labour performed at work can be replicated at home, especially when managing family relationships or caregiving responsibilities (Beharrie & Mabitsela, 2023).

The demands of emotional labour compound when overlapping with traditional gender roles at home. Women who work are often still expected to lead the emotional "infrastructure" of the household: remembering anniversaries, soothing tensions, organizing family social life, and nurturing relational bonds. These invisible burdens, sometimes called the "mental load", are not captured simply by hours spent; they involve cognitive labour, constant emotional vigilance, and relational management (Barigozzi et al., 2025). While much of that research is global, the pattern is deeply relevant in South African homes, where women frequently act as emotional anchors, even when they contribute significantly to the family's income or ambitions. Emotional labour in marriage is not neutral: it shapes power because it gives women relational leverage even when they may lack financial control. When partners negotiate major life decisions, such as further education, emotional labour can become a currency. A wife may resist her husband's proposal to study not simply out of fear of neglect, but because she anticipates losing her role as emotional caregiver. She may deploy subtle emotional strategies, anxiety, concern, withdrawal, to negotiate for her need for reassurance and connectedness. Conversely, a husband may frame his study ambitions in relational terms ("this will benefit us"), but still inadvertently impose emotional distance. These dynamics can generate tension, because negotiation is not only about resources but about relational identity and care. Although direct research on marital emotional labour in South Africa is still emerging, the broader evidence from organizational psychology and social change suggests that relational negotiation of feelings is central to how couples navigate role shifts. The emotional labour performed by women binds relational stability to compliance, while also providing a toolkit for resistance.

Educational Aspirations and Family Negotiations

Education remains one of the most potent levers for social mobility in South Africa. The link between educational attainment and labour market participation continues to be reinforced by national data: higher education often translates into more stable employment, higher incomes, and greater capacity to make strategic life investments (JET & Reos Partners, 2025). Nevertheless, pursuing further studies within a married relationship is rarely a purely individual project, it implicates both partners, and by extension, the relational order of the home. When one spouse expresses a desire to pursue further education, that aspiration must often be negotiated not only in terms of time and money, but in terms of relational trust, shared sacrifice, and emotional bandwidth. For example, in many South African homes, married couples must reconcile the competing demands of study, caregiving, domestic responsibilities, and self-care. Even in households where financial support is possible, as in a case where the husband offers to fund his wife's studies, practical and emotional barriers may arise. These include concerns about role change, fear of neglect, and disagreements about priorities. Women, in particular, face what researchers call the "double burden" or "double shift": they are expected to excel in their careers or studies, while simultaneously managing significant domestic and emotional labour (Kinnear & Naidoo, 2024). In their study of female manufacturing managers, Kinnear and Naidoo (2024) find that women cope with work–family conflict by deploying multiple strategies, setting boundaries, reordering priorities, drawing on social support, but even then, they report emotional exhaustion and ongoing stress. These findings suggest that for educated women, aspirations beyond the home do not automatically relieve responsibility; instead, they layer onto existing relational demands. In households where education is pursued by the husband, the wife may respond with ambivalence or even resistance, particularly when her own identity and value have been historically tied to relational roles. A husband's return to academia might be perceived as a threat to emotional closeness: she may fear that long hours of study will mean less shared time, less intimacy, more isolation. These emotional calculations are rarely captured in purely economic models of household bargaining.

Furthermore, bargaining over education often occurs against the backdrop of deeply rooted cultural norms. According to UNDP commentary on tradition and transformation in South Africa, cultural and religious beliefs continue to limit women's aspirations, reinforcing gender inequality in family and public life (United Nations in South Africa, 2025). Even when formal opportunities are available, intangible barriers, shame, guilt, social expectation,

can prevent full realization of ambition. The negotiation over education is thus not simply a matter of who pays, it is also a negotiation over meaning, identity, and belonging. Parental involvement and caregiver dynamics also play a role in shaping educational aspirations. The new HSRC Press volume on parental and caregiver involvement documents how family support (or lack thereof) influences learners' trajectories in school and beyond (JET & Reos Partners, 2025). While this work is primarily focused on children, the deeper insight is that family dynamics, power, emotional support, resource allocation, matter deeply to educational success. By extension, when an adult seeks to further their education, those same relational mechanisms come into play: are they supported by their partner in ways that respect not just the financial investment but also the relational and emotional cost? Finally, access to education and resources intersects with gendered structural barriers. Women in lower-income contexts or rural areas often face compounded challenges when seeking education: poverty, caregiving obligations, and limited financial independence. Studies on female entrepreneurship in rural South Africa, for instance, document that women struggle to access funding because of socio-cultural and institutional constraints (Adm. Sci., 2025). While this research focuses on business, it underlines a broader pattern: when women try to invest in their own future, whether through business or education, they often contend with relational and systemic forms of marginalization.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite these rich insights, there are important gaps in the literature, especially around how educational ambition is negotiated in the intimate space of marriage, particularly under gendered power dynamics. Some key gaps include:

- ***Lack of Marital-Specific Studies on Educational Negotiation:*** Much of the research on emotional labour and gendered conflict focuses on workplace settings (Beharrie & Mabitsela, 2023; Kinnear & Naidoo, 2024), leaving a lacuna when it comes to how these dynamics play out in married couples, particularly around long-term investments like further education. There is scant qualitative research that centers on how spouses negotiate a partner's return to study, how they trade off emotional needs, and how resource control factors into these decisions.
- ***Insufficient Attention to Conditional Support:*** While it's common to document that one partner (often the male) offers financial support for the other's education, fewer studies explore scenarios where that support is conditional or contested. For example, little is known about how emotional labour is used as leverage, whether a husband conditions his

financial pledge on continued emotional closeness, whether a wife resists because she fears relational abandonment, or how these trade-offs influence decision-making.

- ***Underexplored Power-Emotion Nexus:*** While structural analyses (e.g., familial demographics, household headship) are robust, there is less exploration of the emotional dimension of power in marriage, that is, how feelings, connection, and identity influence who “wins” negotiations, and how emotional labour becomes a form of power or resistance. Existing research on emotional labour in the workplace (Beharrie & Mabitsela, 2023) points to its importance, but domestic contexts remain under-investigated.
- ***Cultural and Contextual Nuances:*** South African scholarship often addresses gender-based violence (Mudimeli & Khosa-Nkatini, 2024; Naicker, 2025) and patriarchal norms (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023), but fewer studies tie these directly to the negotiation of education in marriage. Cultural analyses frequently focus on pastoral care or social harm, rather than on ambition and aspiration. There is room for more culturally grounded, relational research that links traditional norms and modern educational trajectories.
- ***Intersectional Analysis:*** Much of the literature does not sufficiently account for how class, race, rural-urban divides, and housing context intersect with gender and education negotiation. For instance, women living in informal or backyard housing experience high emotional and physical burdens (HSRC, 2025), but how these structural pressures shape marital decision-making about education remains under-examined.
- ***Longitudinal and Life-Course Perspectives:*** There is a dearth of longitudinal research that follows married couples over time to observe how educational decisions, role expectations, and emotional dynamics evolve. Most existing studies are cross-sectional, limiting our understanding of how aspirations and power relations shift across life stages. By addressing these gaps, future research can more fully illuminate how married couples in South Africa (and similar contexts) navigate competing ambitions, emotional needs, and structural constraints. In particular, studies could focus on in-depth qualitative interviews, dyadic designs (studying both spouses), and mixed-methods approaches to trace how educational ambitions are negotiated, resisted, embraced, or reconfigured in real relational settings.

Synthesis: Towards a Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the literature reviewed, one can begin to articulate a conceptual framework for understanding how educational aspirations and emotional labour intersect in marital power dynamics in South Africa. This framework rests on three interlocking domains:

- **Structural Power (Resources and Role):** This domain captures the material side of negotiation, who controls money, who has time, whose labour is needed to support study. Spouses who are financially dominant may offer support, but their power comes with expectations. Conversely, the financially dependent spouse may leverage emotional labour or relational intimacy to negotiate conditions.
- **Emotional Power (Care and Labour):** This domain centers on how emotional labour gives relational leverage. Women often manage not only their own emotions, but those of their spouse, subtly influencing decisions by expressing worries, fear of isolation, or desire for closeness. Emotional labour is both a burden and a resource, a source of influence, but also one of vulnerability.
- **Cultural-Relational Power (Identity, Norms, and Aspiration):** This domain involves how cultural norms and identities shape negotiation. Gendered expectations (tradition, religion, societal pressure) influence how spouses interpret educational ambition. A woman may internalize the idea that pursuing study threatens marital harmony; a man may view his ambition as fulfilling his provider identity. Their decisions are not purely rational but deeply embedded in relational meaning.

By examining how these domains intersect, researchers can better understand why educational decisions in marriage are rarely straightforward. Power is not just about money; it's also about love, identity, and emotional connection. Negotiations are ongoing, textured, and often asymmetrical, yet they are also sites of possibility, struggle, and transformation.

Implications for Future Research

Based on the gaps and the conceptual synthesis, a number of promising avenues for empirical inquiry emerge:

- **Dyadic Qualitative Studies:** Researchers should conduct interviews with both partners in married couples to understand how each perceives the negotiation over further education, emotional needs, and power. Such dyadic work would reveal how ambitions are framed, resisted, or supported in real-time relational contexts.
- **Longitudinal Designs:** Following couples over time (e.g., before, during, and after one partner undertakes further study) can illuminate how power and emotional labour evolve.

This would help trace changes in role identities, resource distribution, and emotional well-being.

- **Intersectional Approaches:** Studies should explicitly consider how socioeconomic status, race, location (urban vs rural), and housing conditions mediate negotiation. For instance, how might a woman living in informal housing manage emotional labour differently than one in a more economically secure setting?
- **Cultural-Relational Measures:** Quantitative and mixed-methods research could develop scales to measure the emotional “currency” used in negotiation (e.g., concern, withdrawal, reassurance) and relate these to outcomes like study completion, marital satisfaction, and mental health.
- **Intervention Research:** Based on insights, couples’ counsellors, educators, and policymakers could design interventions to support equitable negotiation. Workshops or programs might help couples articulate shared goals, set boundaries, and negotiate emotional needs in ways that honour both ambition and care.
- **Policy Implications:** Findings could inform educational funding policies (e.g., scholarship programs for adult learners), employer support for studying spouses, and community-based gender-transformative interventions that challenge traditional role expectations while affirming relational health.

Conclusion of the Literature Review

The literature shows that gender roles and power in South African households remain deeply influenced by tradition, economic inequality, and emotional dynamics. Emotional labour, especially practiced by women, is a critical but under-examined factor in how couples negotiate major life decisions, including educational aspirations. At the same time, education remains a vital pathway for social mobility, making marital negotiations over study both personally significant and socially consequential. However, existing research often overlooks the relational complexity of these negotiations: how emotional labour is deployed, how financial support interacts with vulnerability, and how cultural norms shape ambition. By bringing together insights from studies on emotional labour, work–family conflict, household demography, and gender-based violence, one can begin to conceptualize a nuanced framework that foregrounds structural, emotional, and cultural power. Addressing the gaps in the literature through dyadic, longitudinal, and intersectional research will deepen our understanding of how couples navigate ambition and care in ways that are equitable and emotionally sustaining. Such scholarship has real implications: for individuals wrestling with

study decisions in their marriage, for practitioners designing support interventions, and for policymakers committed to gender equality and lifelong learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This analysis draws on two theoretical lenses: feminist power theory and relational theory.

Feminist Power Theory proposes that power in relationships is not only about overt authority or resources but also about the control of decision-making, emotional labour, and legitimacy (Allen, 2020). In marital contexts, resource control (such as funding education) can coexist with emotional dependence, producing a complex power interplay.

Relational Theory, especially as developed in family sociology, emphasizes that individuals are deeply interdependent. Emotional needs, recognition, and mutual responsiveness shape how partners negotiate life courses (Jordan, 2017). In the scenario of conflicting educational aspirations, the relational lens helps explain how emotional labour becomes both a demand and a bargaining tool.

These theories allow us to examine not just who holds resources, but how emotional labour and relational expectations influence power and negotiation around education.

METHODOLOGY

Given the goal of this article as a conceptual and theoretical exploration, the methodology uses a *narrative-critical approach* drawing on existing, publicly available research rather than new primary data collection. This means there is no need for ethical clearance because the study synthesizes published findings, policy reports, and theoretical perspectives.

- **Design:** A narrative-critical literature synthesis, combining empirical studies from South Africa with feminist and relational theory.
- **Data Sources:** Academic journal articles, open-access reports, policy documents, and recent empirical papers (from 2019–2024).
- **Sampling:** Purposeful selection of studies that deal with gender roles, emotional labour, and education in South Africa (e.g., workplace studies, household studies).
- **Analysis:** Thematic analysis, reading across sources to identify recurring themes (such as emotional labour, power negotiation, resource control, and relational conflict), and critically interpreting them through the theoretical lenses.

This method allows for a careful, theory-driven exploration without the complexities or requirements of empirical human subjects' research.

RESULTS

This section presents the key themes that emerged from synthesizing the literature on gender roles, emotional labour, educational aspirations, and marital power dynamics in South Africa. Although the literature spans sociology, psychology, gender studies, and education, the themes coalesce around four main areas: emotional labour as a negotiation tool, resource-based power asymmetries, conflict over time and priorities, and the influence of institutional and structural factors. Each theme captures how intimacy, tradition, and aspiration converge within marital relationships where one partner seeks to pursue further education.

Emotion as a Negotiation Currency

Across multiple studies, emotional labour consistently emerges as a central mechanism through which spouses, particularly wives who are full-time homemakers, negotiate their needs and assert their presence within the household. Emotional labour, variously described as the ongoing management of one's own emotions and those of others, is disproportionately performed by women in both workplace and domestic contexts (Beharrie & Mabitsela, 2023). Although the literature often highlights this trend in formal employment settings, women's emotional work at home is equally significant. It includes maintaining relational harmony, anticipating emotional disruptions, and responding to the affective needs of spouses and children. This emotional labour functions as a form of relational capital. In marriages where the husband is the primary breadwinner, the wife's role as the emotional caretaker becomes an important part of how she maintains influence and ensures her needs are heard. Research on gendered emotional expectations in South African households shows that women often feel responsible for the emotional wellbeing of their families, even when they lack financial leverage (Khosa-Nkatini, Buqa, & Machimana, 2023). In this context, emotional labour becomes a negotiation currency, an implicit but powerful way of shaping decision-making.

When a husband proposes to pursue further studies, the household emotional system is disrupted. This disruption often intensifies the wife's emotional labour because the anticipated reduction in shared time may threaten the relational closeness she manages daily. Studies on marital expectations in patriarchal cultures note that emotional intimacy is often a wife's primary source of relational validation, especially when she lacks independent income or social recognition outside the home (Mudimeli & Khosa-Nkatini, 2024). Thus, the wife's request for more emotional attention when her husband begins to study does not simply signal insecurity; it reflects a deeper need for relational stability and acknowledgement. The

literature further demonstrates that emotional labour is not just expressive but strategic. In relationships where major decisions must be negotiated, emotions can become tools for persuasion. For instance, women may use emotional appeals, such as expressing loneliness, fear of neglect, or perceived loss of connection, to influence their spouse's educational or professional plans (Barigozzi et al., 2025). This behaviour is not manipulative but rather reflective of structurally constrained power: when financial control is limited, emotional expression becomes a culturally sanctioned mode of influence. In summary, emotional labour serves both as a coping mechanism and as a negotiation tool. It is one of the few forms of power readily available to spouses who are socially positioned as caregivers. When the husband's academic aspirations threaten established patterns of emotional intimacy, the wife's intensified emotional labour underscores the relational adjustments required, adjustments that are often invisible but profoundly consequential.

Power Asymmetries in Resource Control

Another clear theme in the literature concerns the uneven distribution of financial power within many South African households. Financial resources continue to play a central role in determining who holds decision-making authority. In many marriages, the breadwinning spouse, most often the husband, occupies a dominant position when negotiating large-scale decisions such as education, relocation, or major purchases. Studies on marital decision-making show that financial contribution strongly correlates with household authority, reinforcing gendered hierarchies even when couples describe their relationships as modern or egalitarian (Mathe & Radebe, 2022). In situations where husbands offer to financially support their wives' educational pursuits, the gesture may appear empowering, but the literature suggests more complexity. Financial support offered within a power-unequal marriage often comes with implicit expectations. These expectations may be relational (e.g., continued emotional availability), behavioural (e.g., household duties should remain unchanged), or symbolic (e.g., gratitude toward the supporting spouse). Scholarship on gender dynamics indicates that financial gestures in unequal relationships can reproduce, rather than dismantle, patriarchal authority (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023).

Moreover, financial generosity does not guarantee that the recipient feels free to accept the offer. Empirical studies reveal that women may decline educational opportunities funded by their partners due to fear of relational conflict, role strain, or perceived debt (Kinnear & Naidoo, 2024). If the offer is interpreted as conditional, even subtly, it may undermine the

sense of autonomy required to comfortably engage in studies. This dynamic mirrors findings from research on women's access to entrepreneurship funding in rural South Africa, which shows that financial support often comes with socially embedded limitations that reduce true empowerment (Adm. Sci., 2025). Thus, financial power shapes educational negotiations in two ways. First, it enables one spouse to make the offer, controlling the means through which opportunities are accessed. Second, it subtly influences how the other spouse interprets the implications of accepting or rejecting that offer. This combination reinforces power asymmetries even in moments that appear cooperative.

Conflict Over Time and Priorities

Time is an important dimension of power, especially in families where gendered divisions of labour are entrenched. The literature consistently shows that women carry a disproportionate share of household management, caregiving responsibilities, and emotional labour (Barigozzi et al., 2025; Beharrie & Mabitsela, 2023). When husbands undertake further studies, the burden of maintaining family routines often falls even more heavily on wives. This shift contributes to conflict about priorities and household rhythms. Studies on work–family conflict in South Africa highlight that time scarcity is a significant predictor of marital tension (Kinnear & Naidoo, 2024). When educational demands absorb a spouse's time, particularly evenings, weekends, and late-night hours, the other spouse may feel neglected or overwhelmed. The literature shows that such tensions are more pronounced in households where children are present, as caregiving intensifies during non-working hours (JET & Reos Partners, 2025). A wife's resistance to her husband's study schedule, especially during quiet hours after children sleep, represents not only a desire for companionship but also a plea for shared responsibility.

This conflict over time also reveals whose schedule is prioritized. In traditional households, the husband's time is often framed as more valuable due to his provider role, leading to implicit assumptions that his study schedule must be accommodated. But when women's emotional and caregiving labour remains invisible, their need for relational time appears secondary. Scholarship on gendered time use argues that conflict arises precisely because the labour supporting households, cooking, planning, mediating conflict, maintaining emotional closeness, is not acknowledged as work (Barigozzi et al., 2025). Temporal conflict therefore becomes a proxy for deeper disagreements about fairness, recognition, and relational reciprocity. If the husband expects uninterrupted study hours while the wife assumes greater

caregiving and emotional burdens, both partners may feel unsupported. The wife may interpret the husband's absence as emotional withdrawal, while the husband may perceive her concerns as a barrier to self-improvement. This mismatch reinforces relational tension and exposes structural inequalities. Ultimately, conflict over time and priorities is less about scheduling and more about interpersonal balance. It concerns how partners value each other's contributions, how they negotiate shared time, and how they recognize the emotional cost of long-term educational commitments.

Institutional and Structural Constraints

The final major theme concerns the broader academic, cultural, and social structures that influence how couples navigate educational aspirations. While South African universities provide flexible options, including online learning, part-time degrees, and modular programs, research shows that many adult learners and their families are unaware of or uncertain about how to make use of these pathways (HSRC, 2024). Structural barriers such as limited internet access, transport constraints, or low academic confidence often deter potential students from pursuing part-time education (JET & Reos Partners, 2025). Cultural expectations also shape whether pursuing further education feels emotionally safe. In communities where traditional gender norms remain strong, pursuing education may be interpreted as abandoning one's domestic duties or challenging established power relations (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023). This perspective discourages spouses, especially women, from studying, even when opportunities are available. The United Nations' analysis of tradition and transformation in South Africa confirms that gender norms for women continue to limit educational aspirations, often reinforcing the idea that self-improvement is secondary to familial duties (United Nations in South Africa, 2025).

Structural constraints also include economic inequality, which affects how families allocate resources. Even when one partner is willing and able to support the other financially, societal beliefs about gender roles may stigmatize men who allow their wives to study or women who do not prioritize caregiving. These pressures operate through families, churches, community institutions, and even workplace cultures (Mudimeli & Khosa-Nkatini, 2024). Thus, individuals negotiate education within a broader ecosystem of structural barriers and cultural expectations. Understanding these institutional dynamics is crucial, because they shape not only what opportunities are available but also whether those opportunities feel viable, acceptable, or sustainable in marriage.

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis point to a multidimensional relationship between education, emotional labour, gendered power, and marital negotiation. The findings show that educational aspirations within marriage cannot be understood solely through financial capability or availability of academic opportunities. Rather, they depend on how partners manage emotional responsibilities, relational expectations, and entrenched cultural norms about gender and authority. Recent South African scholarship emphasises that intimate relationships continue to operate within a broader landscape of patriarchy, uneven access to resources, and emotional interdependence (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023). This means that decisions that appear individual, such as pursuing further education, are in fact embedded in collective relational processes shaped by gendered meanings of care, obligation, and power. The results reveal that emotional labour operates as a significant negotiating tool in these dynamics. Women in South African heterosexual marriages continue to carry disproportionate responsibility for sustaining relational intimacy and emotional harmony, even when they are not participating in the formal labour market (Beharrie & Mabitsela, 2023). In the scenario examined, the wife's resistance to the husband's study ambitions is not necessarily rooted in a lack of interest in education, but in a desire to preserve the emotional closeness that she sees as central to the marriage. Scholars argue that emotional labour is used to secure relational stability, affection, and recognition, especially in contexts where women have less economic power (Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2021). The findings support this observation by illustrating how emotional needs become negotiation currency in the marital space. The wife's insistence on emotional availability reflects a perception that the husband's commitment to academic work threatens the relational environment that provides her with security and identity.

This complexity also highlights gaps in assuming that financial generosity translates directly into empowerment. Although the husband may offer to fund his wife's further studies, recent gender scholarship shows that resource provision does not automatically redress existing power hierarchies (Ratele, 2020). Financial support can still operate within a framework where the provider maintains symbolic authority. Furthermore, even when opportunities exist, partners may resist them if emotional stability seems at risk. Studies on household decision-making in post-apartheid South Africa show that financial inequality and emotional dependency often coexist, creating tension in negotiations about personal development (Mkhize & Ndimande, 2022). The results indicate that the wife's reluctance to study is not

only a matter of preference but is shaped by the belief that pursuing her own educational ambitions could unsettle established relational roles and redistribute emotional responsibility. Another important finding emerging from the synthesis is the tension around time management and relational rhythms. Time itself becomes a site of conflict. The husband's study schedule disrupts established household routines, particularly during evenings when couples typically engage in shared relaxation or family bonding. Research in South African families confirms that women often value routine shared time as a marker of relational unity and emotional connectedness (Matuku & Kaseke, 2021). This means that the husband's time spent studying is interpreted not merely as physical unavailability but as a withdrawal of emotional presence. Feminist theorists explain that this interpretation reflects a broader gender norm that prioritises women's relational labour and positions them as custodians of emotional intimacy (van Niekerk & Boonzaier, 2023). Consequently, prioritising study time over relational time becomes a symbolic statement about whose needs and ambitions matter more.

These tensions also align with international findings on work-study-family negotiation, where partners often struggle to balance academic demands with emotional expectations (Shah & Barker, 2024). However, the South African context adds additional layers. The cultural expectation that men demonstrate authority through provision and that women maintain relational harmony amplifies these conflicts (Rasool, 2022). In this landscape, studying, especially at postgraduate levels, is not seen as a simple individual project, but as an activity requiring the reorganisation of family life. When this reorganisation destabilises long-standing dynamics, emotional resistance often intensifies. Another significant thematic insight concerns the institutional and structural constraints that shape how couples negotiate educational aspirations. While universities in South Africa increasingly offer flexible evening classes, online learning options, and part-time study pathways, research shows that many adults remain unaware of how to integrate these tools into family responsibilities (HSRC, 2024). Even when these options are available, cultural expectations about gender roles may discourage their adoption. For example, women may resist online or evening study schedules because managing time for themselves feels inconsistent with expectations of full emotional availability to their partners and families. Recent qualitative studies on adult education confirm that many women experience guilt when they prioritise study time over relational duties, even when their partners are supportive (Mkhabela, 2022). The results of this paper

align with that evidence, showing that emotional labour demands override even well-designed institutional flexibility.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that emotional resistance to study is often linked to fears of relational disconnection rather than to concerns about academic difficulty. Research has shown that when men become absorbed in educational or career development, women often interpret this shift as a potential loss of partnership cohesion (Sibanda & Moyo, 2023). These interpretations are rooted in historical and cultural narratives that associate men's emotional distance with declining marital commitment. Thus, the wife's reaction in the scenario is a reflection of broader socio-cultural anxieties surrounding marital security. It is important to recognise that these anxieties are not irrational but are formed through long patterns of relational experience and socialised gender norms. From a theoretical standpoint, these findings are consistent with relational theory, which posits that individuals' choices are shaped by their interdependence with others and by the emotional meanings embedded in relationships (Ferguson & Adams, 2020). Relational theory highlights that decisions like enrolling in postgraduate education require renegotiation of emotional routines. They are not simply matters of logistics or ambition. The results also confirm insights from feminist power theory, which argues that power operates not only through economic dominance or decision-making authority but also through control of emotional resources, identity, and relational expectations (Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2021). The wife's emotional dependency does not mean she lacks influence; rather, emotional labour becomes her method of asserting agency. By withholding or demanding emotional connection, she exerts relational power that shapes the husband's choices regarding his academic trajectory.

This understanding challenges simplistic interpretations that position financially dependent spouses as passive. Instead, emotional labour becomes a sophisticated form of negotiation, allowing partners without economic power to influence the direction of family decisions. Yet, the results also show that this form of power may come at a cost, particularly when emotional needs suppress personal growth opportunities, as seen when spouses resist further education in order to maintain relational equilibrium. The implications of these findings point toward the need for more holistic intervention strategies for couples where one or both partners pursue further education. Scholars argue that marital conflict around education often reduces when partners develop shared understandings of time, emotional needs, and support structures (Shah & Barker, 2024). Effective interventions thus require more than financial

planning. They demand structured conversations that allow both partners to articulate their expectations, fears, and aspirations. Couples may benefit from facilitated dialogue sessions led by counsellors, social workers, or community-based family support programs. In addition, the results indicate a practical role for educational institutions. Universities and adult learning centres can support married students by designing programmes that address the relational dimensions of study life. For instance, orientation workshops for postgraduate students could include discussions on family-study balance, emotional negotiation, and strategies for maintaining connectedness during intensive study periods. Research shows that when partners feel included in academic planning, resistance to study commitments decreases (Mkhabela, 2022). Institutions could also encourage peer-support groups where married students share coping strategies and time-management approaches that accommodate family realities.

Future research is essential to deepen understanding of these findings. Longitudinal qualitative studies would be particularly valuable. They could follow couples over several years as one partner undertakes postgraduate education, mapping how emotional labour, power relations, and relational satisfaction shift during the academic journey. Furthermore, comparative studies across provinces or cultural groups could highlight variations in how gender norms affect educational negotiation in marriage. Overall, the discussion demonstrates that educational aspirations are not simply academic endeavours but relational projects shaped by emotional investment and gendered expectations. For couples to thrive while pursuing individual growth, they need relational tools that foster empathy, mutual support, and flexibility.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to explore how educational aspirations intersect with emotional labour within South African marriages, particularly in situations where one partner seeks to further their studies while the other depends heavily on emotional presence and relational routines. The analysis revealed that these negotiations are far more complex than they might initially appear. They are not questions of education alone, nor are they simply matters of affordability or access. Instead, they are deeply entwined with gendered expectations, cultural norms, long-standing relational patterns, and the emotional interdependence that structures marital life. The findings demonstrated that emotional labour plays a central role in shaping how couples negotiate academic ambitions. In many South African households, women

remain primarily responsible for maintaining emotional harmony, relational stability, and the daily rhythms of family connection. For couples where the wife is a stay-at-home spouse, this emotional responsibility often becomes her primary form of labour and her main source of influence within the marriage. When the husband expresses a desire to pursue further education, the wife may interpret this shift not as a practical rearranging of schedules but as a potential withdrawal of emotional availability. Her resistance therefore becomes a form of relational communication, signalling concern about the possible disruption of the emotional closeness she safeguards.

In this way, educational aspirations become entangled with emotional meaning. The husband's desire to study is not merely a personal goal but a change that challenges established relational patterns. His study commitments require time alone, mental focus, and periods of emotional distance. For the wife, these shifts can feel like a threat to marital unity, especially when she does not have access to the same external opportunities or social validation. The conflict that arises is not rooted in hostility toward education itself but in a fear that personal ambitions may erode relational security. The analysis also highlighted how power in marriage extends beyond income. Although financial provision plays a critical role in many households, emotional resources carry an equally significant weight. A spouse who manages emotional rhythms, provides comfort, and maintains relational cohesion exercises a different but meaningful form of influence. This emotional authority becomes most visible when couples negotiate changes that disrupt established routines. In such moments, emotional labour becomes a subtle but effective negotiation tool. A spouse may express distress, withdraw affection, or request additional time together as a way of balancing the equation of power and influence.

This dynamic complicates assumptions that financial power automatically grants decision-making authority. Even when the financially dominant partner offers support for the other spouse's education or personal development, the offer may not be accepted. The refusal is not necessarily a rejection of opportunity but a response to relational fears or unmet emotional needs. This reflects a commonly overlooked reality: empowerment cannot be purchased solely through material resources. Instead, it must be embedded in relational trust, open communication, and shared understanding. The tension between time and emotion also emerged as a significant issue. Educational pursuits require structured time commitments, often during evenings or weekends. In many marriages, these hours represent critical periods

of shared rest, conversation, or family bonding. When study schedules encroach on these moments, partners may feel overlooked or displaced. Time becomes a symbolic resource, one that reflects care, commitment, and mutual importance. The negotiation over study time is, at its core, a negotiation over whose needs and priorities are recognised. This reveals how deeply intertwined time, emotion, and identity become in marital life.

Institutional and structural limitations further shape how couples navigate these issues. Although universities offer flexible learning options, many couples lack awareness of how such possibilities could support a balanced approach to family life. More importantly, cultural norms about gender roles influence how partners perceive these choices. Women may feel guilty for pursuing studies that require time away from caregiving duties. Men may feel pressure to appear constantly available as providers, even when pursuing education would ultimately benefit the family. These intersecting pressures highlight the need for academic institutions and policymakers to consider the relational and emotional dimensions of adult education. The findings from this paper call for a more holistic understanding of educational ambition within marriage. Too often, academic planning assumes individuals operate independently, guided by personal goals and professional interests. However, for married adults, especially within contexts shaped by strong cultural norms, educational pursuits are relational endeavours. They require couples to re-evaluate routines, roles, and emotional expectations. They necessitate communication about fears, hopes, aspirations, and insecurities. And they demand new strategies for balancing care with ambition.

Supporting couples through these transitions requires interventions that reach beyond financial assistance. Couples may benefit from facilitated conversations about time management, emotional needs, gender roles, and long-term planning. Counsellors, social workers, and family therapists can play a supportive role in helping spouses articulate expectations and negotiate new relational arrangements. For example, couples might develop shared schedules that preserve both study time and emotional connection. They might also explore strategies for emotional reassurance that help reduce anxiety about relational distance during intensive study periods. Universities can also contribute by designing programmes that acknowledge the relational dimensions of study. Orientation sessions could include guidance on balancing family responsibilities, maintaining communication with partners, and navigating emotional challenges associated with academic demands. Peer support groups for

married students could create spaces where individuals learn from one another's experiences and develop practical strategies for sustaining both academic and relational wellbeing.

Looking ahead, more empirical research is essential to deepen understanding of these dynamics. Qualitative interviews with couples who have navigated postgraduate studies could uncover the subtle ways emotional labour shapes decision-making. Longitudinal studies would be especially valuable, allowing researchers to document how relationships shift over the course of academic programmes and how partners adapt to changing demands. Comparative studies across provinces, socioeconomic backgrounds, or cultural groups could reveal important variations in how these negotiations unfold. Overall, this article has shown that educational aspirations and emotional labour are inseparable elements of marital life. They influence one another in ways that are complex, subtle and deeply rooted in gendered expectations. To support meaningful growth for both partners, couples must engage in open, honest negotiation that recognises the importance of both ambition and care. Similarly, educational institutions and policymakers must acknowledge that adult learning occurs not in isolation but within families and relationships that carry long histories of emotional meaning. By addressing these relational dimensions, it becomes possible to create environments where both partners can pursue personal development without compromising the emotional foundations of their marriage.

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