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Enhancing self-confidence as female academics through sharing experiences

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Authors:
Anthea H.M. Jacobs[1]
Lucretia Z. Valentine[2]

Affiliations:
[1]Dean's Office, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

[2]Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering, Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Anthea Jacobs,
antjacobs@uwc.ac.za

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Background: In higher education (HE), female academics frequently experience self-doubt, imposter syndrome and marginalisation, which can negatively impact their self-confidence. These challenges are intensified by systemic gender biases and exclusionary institutional cultures.

Objectives: This study explores how two female academics situated within the South African HE context reclaimed their self-confidence through participation in an informal community of practice (CoP). It examines how relational and reflective support can contribute to academic identity formation and professional growth.

Methods: Using collaborative autoethnography (CAE), the authors reflected on their lived experiences of navigating academic spaces. As both participants and co-researchers, they drew on personal narratives to explore the intersections of career confidence, institutional culture and gendered experiences. Framed by Moon's Theory of Academic Assertiveness, Feminist Voice Theory and Feminist Praxis, the authors employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret key patterns within their reflections.

Results: The study revealed five interrelated themes: (1) gendered barriers and structural inequity, (2) emotional toll and loss of confidence, (3) disrupted career trajectories, (4) the transformative potential of shared vulnerability and (5) the empowering role of a CoP. Informal peer support was found to be a powerful mechanism for enhancing confidence and fostering resilience.

Conclusion: Self-confidence in academia is not a given but is shaped by institutional contexts and interpersonal support. While structural reforms are essential, grassroot communities of practice offer meaningful, affirming spaces for career development and self-empowerment.

Contribution: This study highlights how informal, reflective partnerships can serve as tools for building self-confidence among female academics, offering valuable insights for career development, mentorship and institutional transformation.

Keywords: self-confidence; female academics; collaborative autoethnography; communities of practice; imposter syndrome.

Introduction

Academia is a competitive environment that remains male dominated and marked by gender bias (Onyegeme-Okerenta, 2022). Few women occupy top positions in universities – not because of a lack of competence or qualifications, but because many struggle with low self-confidence and have internalised the belief that academia is a male space. This lack of self-belief affects various aspects of women's professional lives and can take a toll on their emotional well-being (Herbst, 2020). Some female academics avoid publishing or presenting their work out of fear of judgement or rejection, often rooted in perceived or imagined responses from others (Onyegeme-Okerenta, 2022). Imposter syndrome further compounds these challenges. It refers to 'persistent feelings of inadequacy despite evidence of competence' (Brevata et al., 2019, p. X). In this article, we reflect on our experiences of becoming aware of these internalised doubts.

Uncertainty in the academic workplace can fuel stress and anxiety, particularly for female academics navigating gendered expectations, caregiving responsibilities and the pressure to earn recognition in a male-centric environment. These challenges can erode self-confidence and hinder a sense of belonging. As Askins and Blazek (2016) argue, emotions in academia matter and strategies are needed to navigate such spaces. One such strategy is cultivating supportive communities of practice (CoPs) that enable shared reflection and growth.

In this collaborative autoethnography (CAE), we reflect on our experiences of navigating uncertain and demanding higher education (HE) spaces. We questioned whether our feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence stemmed from impostor syndrome despite our qualifications and efforts. Through informal, early-morning conversations during training runs, we gradually opened up about our professional challenges. These spontaneous exchanges evolved into a small, supportive CoP. This space allowed us to share ideas and affirm our identities. While CoPs are increasingly common in academia, few studies have explored their impact on the confidence of female academics. Our organically formed peer relationship, rooted in mutual care and shared purpose, became a site for connection, growth and self-empowerment.

This reflective article is guided by the question: how do we, as two female academics, navigate our professional journeys in HE? We explore how building a collaborative network, sharing ideas and experiences and fostering a supportive relationship within a safe and inclusive environment contributed to enhancing our self-confidence as female academics.

Given the deeply personal nature of this inquiry, we provide a brief overview of our academic roles and lived experiences that underpin our reflections. These contexts shaped our perspectives and highlight why this topic resonates with both of us.

Author 1 holds Master's and PhD degrees in Education and has worked across the basic, further and HE sectors. Currently a Learning and Teaching (L&T) Specialist at a South African university, her role centres on supporting academics in their learning, teaching and assessment practices. Her professional journey has been shaped by persistent gender-based challenges, including subtle bias and systemic exclusion. These experiences often led to self-doubt and a sense of invisibility. However, finding a supportive CoP offered renewed confidence in her work.

Author 2 is Programme Coordinator for Quality in the Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering at another South African institution. With a background in Food Technology and a PhD in Commerce and Administration, she brings over a decade of industry experience to academia. Her transition into HE, particularly within a faculty dominated by engineers, has been marked by steep learning curves and self-doubt. In finding a trusted CoP, she discovered an affirming space for rebuilding confidence as a female academic navigating complex institutional terrain.

Before proceeding, we introduce the theoretical framework that underpins our reflections. In what follows, we draw on key constructs and gendered dimensions related to being a female academic in HE that shaped our experiences.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on three intersecting lenses: Moon's Theory of Academic Assertiveness, Feminist Voice Theory and Feminist Praxis. These lenses are used to explore how two female academics navigate voice, confidence and belonging in South African HE.

Moon's (2009) Theory of Academic Assertiveness positions assertiveness as a vital skill for success in academia, particularly for those who feel marginalised or lack confidence. Moon argues that assertiveness enables individuals to express themselves clearly and confidently. This theory helps explain how our peer support relationship allowed us to challenge internalised self-doubt and develop our academic voices through mutual affirmation.

Feminist Voice Theory, grounded in the work of Gilligan (2023) and expanded by Mitchell (2017), affirms the legitimacy of personal voice and subjectivity. It resists the erasure of identity and instead embraces presence, emotion and relational knowing. McCall (2021) emphasises the role of feminist voices in transforming academia by challenging hegemonic norms and affirming alternative ways of knowing. From an African perspective, scholars such as Mama (2019), Gouws (2012) and Adom-Aboagye and Burnett (2019) highlight the structural and historical challenges faced by women in academic and leadership spaces, calling for feminist solidarity and reimagined inclusive forms of leadership and scholarship. In line with Feminist Voice Theory, Onyegeme-Okerenta (2022) highlights how women in academia often struggle with internalised self-doubt and diminished self-confidence, shaped by systemic gendered dynamics that marginalise their contributions. Her arguments reinforce the importance of fostering spaces where women's voices are affirmed and recognised as legitimate knowledge. These perspectives affirm our choice to centre our personal narratives as valid scholarly contributions.

According to the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (n.d.), feminist praxis links theory and action by advocating for relational, transformative and justice-oriented engagement. Defined as 'the practice of feminist theory', it emphasises acting against oppression through dialogue, solidarity and community. As bell Hooks (2004) reminds us, supportive communities sustain hope and healing. Our small CoP embodied this ethos, offering a space where we could share vulnerabilities without judgement, resist isolation and rebuild our confidence. This relational approach reflects feminist praxis in action, where voice and presence are reclaimed not individually but collectively.

Even though there have been several encouraging developments aimed at challenging the perception that women in HE should perform softer, hospitality-like roles, female academics continue to report a range of persistent challenges. At the same time, faculty requirements for promotion have increased (Mason, 2020), often disproportionately impacting women, particularly those balancing L&T, research and care responsibilities. These conditions suggest that despite policy advancements, the structural and cultural barriers facing female academics remain deeply embedded.

With these conceptual foundations in place, we now turn to the methodological approach that enabled us to make sense of our experiences. Together, the theoretical strands provide a multilayered lens to understand how self-confidence, academic assertiveness and feminist resistance are cultivated within the community and through voice.

Methodology

In this section, we outline our methodological approach, provide an overview of the ethical considerations that shaped our process and present the thematic insights that emerged from our collaborative reflections. Throughout the article, we aim to preserve the distinctiveness of our voices while embracing the relational nature of our shared reflections.

Collaborative autoethnography

Here we explain our CAE approach. Our data are centred around our own reflections of our academic journeys, with our data analysis being thematic. We employed CAE as it offers a variety of modes of engaging with our two selves (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Campbell (2016, p. 95) describes this as a form of 'self-narrative that places the self within a social context'. Collaborative autoethnography enabled us to combine our reflections with our experiences and how they relate to broader cultural and social contexts.

Collaborative autoethnography is a tool to 'break through the dominant representations of professional practice, creating new knowledges' (Denshire, 2014, p. 838) and examine the complexities of HE (Ed. Barkhuizen, 2017). Collaborative autoethnography allowed for a more nuanced understanding of shared experiences. The strengths of using CAE in research include 'self-reflexivity associated with autobiography, cultural interpretation associated with ethnography, and multi-subjectivity associated with collaboration' (Chang et al., 2013, p. 17). Collaborative autoethnography allowed for reflexivity of how we negotiate our roles within our universities to contribute towards driving sustainable and transformative L&T.

We tell our stories of real experiences because we believe in the power of narrative as a form of meaning-making. Sole and Wilson (2002) confirm that sharing experiences through stories is a powerful way to exchange and consolidate knowledge. The sharing of experiences through narratives builds trust and generates emotional connections. For us, storytelling is not only a method of personal reflection but also a valuable scholarly practice that enables the surfacing of hidden struggles. In sharing our experiences, we invite others to see themselves in our stories, to question dominant norms and to co-create more inclusive and empathetic academic spaces. That is why we believe it is not only useful but also necessary.

Our stories involved reflection via journaling. As participants in the HE L&T fraternity, it is imperative to be reflective practitioners. McGregor (2011, p. 4) refers to Dewey, reminding us of the power of reflective practice, and states that 'being reflective requires active consideration about actions and their consequences'. We thus engaged in reflective conversations during which we reflected on our own individual experiences while navigating our respective HE spaces.

Reflection was therefore key in the data collection process. It presented us with an opportunity to examine and verbalise our experiences (Given, 2008, p. 747), which facilitated our understanding thereof. Reflecting on our personal experience and issues of the workspace requires that we be critical and embrace the opportunity to scrutinise the issues that inform our research space. Given (2008, p. 50) reminds us that the researchers' individual experiences are primarily important if one wants to illuminate the experiences under study.

As both co-researchers and participants, we are aware that our positionalities shape the stories we tell. Our reflections are grounded in our lived experiences of navigating gendered, hierarchical and often exclusionary institutional spaces. While this insider perspective enriches the authenticity of the narrative, we acknowledge the risk of reflexive bias. Throughout the writing process, we engaged in critical dialogue with one another to interrogate our assumptions, recognise moments of personal bias and remain open to alternate interpretations. Guided by the Feminist Voice Theory, we also sought to preserve the distinctiveness of our voices, honouring our different institutional roles. Rather than striving for objectivity, we embrace reflexivity as a strength of this research methodology, understanding that our subjectivities are not limitations but sources of insight into the complex realities of academic life. This transparency allows us to honour both the rigour and the vulnerability that CAE demands.

While our collaboration was rooted in mutual respect and trust, we remained mindful of the power dynamics shaped by our differing institutional roles and disciplinary contexts. Author 1 brought experience in reflective pedagogical frameworks, while Author 2 navigated a more traditional, male-dominated academic environment. These positional differences influenced how we engaged in dialogue and interpreted our experiences. Rather than ignoring the asymmetries, we embraced reflexivity and care, consciously creating space for both voices to be valued.

We employed thematic analysis to analyse our reflections. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), we began by immersing ourselves in our self-narratives, reading and re-reading them to gain familiarity with the content. We then manually segmented the data into meaningful units and generated initial codes. Through iterative discussion and reflection, we identified patterns that we grouped into preliminary themes. These themes were refined through cycles of comparison, merging and differentiation, ultimately leading to a final set that captured the emotional, professional and relational dimensions of our shared experience.

This method allowed us to move beyond surface-level descriptions towards a deeper understanding of our professional journeys. By thematising our experiences,

we were able to interpret how broader issues such as self-confidence, academic identity and vulnerability manifested in our everyday lives, and how peer support shaped our sense of agency within HE.

To enhance the trustworthiness of our interpretations, Author 1 shared an early draft of the article with a critical friend with scholarly expertise in gender equality and feminist theory. This external review served as a form of peer debriefing and offered constructive feedback on our thematic interpretations. This helped us to guard against potential blind spots and over-identification with the data.

Ethical considerations

In autoethnographic research, ethical considerations primarily concern the researcher's self-care and the protection of any individuals who may be implicated in the researcher's personal narratives (Tolich, 2010). This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Given the deeply personal and reflective nature of this CAE, ethical considerations were central to our research process. The use of self-narratives required a careful engagement with emotional risk. At every stage of our engagement, we engaged in dialogue to ensure mutual agreement on what would be disclosed. This iterative consent process is a key ethical strategy in CAE where power is shared and trust is foundational (Chang et al., 2013).

Results

Our CAE reflections surfaced a range of resonant themes. What follows are the themes that emerged from our stories, with each section presenting a key idea supported by narrative excerpts and scholarly literature.

Gendered barriers and structural inequity

One of the most prominent themes emerging from both narratives is the persistent presence of structural gender inequality. Despite notable academic achievements, recognition and career advancement often remain elusive, reflecting how entrenched institutional norms continue to disadvantage women in academia.

Both narratives highlight the structural and gendered barriers women face in academia:

> 'It often seems that promotions are reserved for male colleagues, regardless of comparable or even superior qualifications and achievements on my part.' (Author 1, Learning and Teaching Specialist, female)

The other expressed a similar systemic challenge when reflecting:

> 'The bar is forever raised and in some weird way, one becomes entrapped.' (Author 2, Programme Coordinator, female)

These statements reflect the frustration of operating in systems that obscure or deny merit-based progression, particularly for women. These experiences resonate with the Feminist Voice Theory, which critiques how institutional cultures marginalise women's narratives and devalue relational and experiential forms of knowing (Mitchell, 2017; McCall, 2021). They also highlight how gendered power dynamics erode academic assertiveness (Moon, 2009), often leading to self-doubt, despite high achievement.

This raises the question: how do we navigate professional pathways shaped by exclusionary norms? Clark et al. (2024) suggest that by exposing how meritocracy discourse maintains its grip, institutions can begin to redefine what is considered 'merit-worthy'. Such redefinition opens the door to recognising structural inequalities and reimagining more equitable academic cultures.

Loss of confidence and emotional toll

Another thread running through our stories is the toll that systemic barriers and repeated setbacks take on one's confidence and emotional well-being. Our accounts reveal the inner struggle of maintaining professional momentum amid cumulative disappointments and a constant sense of precarity. These experiences mirror what Moon (2009) identifies as the erosion of academic assertiveness in unsupportive environments, where women often internalise systemic exclusion as personal inadequacy.

A deep sense of emotional exhaustion, self-doubt and disappointment runs through both stories:

> 'I have always been acutely aware of my lack of self-confidence and assertiveness, fanning a sense of uncertainty in my professional life.' (Author 1, Learning and Teaching Specialist, female)

> 'Without realising it, the challenges I faced gradually depleted my energy and optimism. This was a title that I was not familiar with, and this resulted in doing some introspection. I had several sleepless nights and finally concluded, that I needed to look out for the sustainability of the Department.' (Author 2, Programme Coordinator, female)

The emotional and psychological cost of navigating academic spaces as a woman, particularly under pressure to constantly prove oneself, is evident. Feminist Voice Theory reminds us that these emotional responses are not merely personal struggles, but reflections of a broader academic culture that devalues women's ways of knowing, being and leading (Mitchell, 2017; McCall, 2021). At this point, we return to CAE as our methodology. Chang (2008) reminds us that it provides a platform for self-transformation that may bring healing from emotional scars of the past. This confirms our choice of methodology. Autoethnography best allowed us to reveal our exclusionary experiences. This method proved to be empowering and liberating.

The role of informal peer support or community of practice

A strong theme of support through informal networks and peer collaboration is presented as a coping and empowering strategy:

> 'We created our own unique network, a space where we could share ideas, reflect on our experiences, and actively "help each other up …" Engaging in this network not only served as a method of self-care but also deepened our practice of reflection within a small CoP.' (Author 1, Learning and Teaching Specialist, female)

Amid several challenges, a significant source of strength came from our informal peer support network. Our small, organic CoP helped us to reframe our experiences, affirm one another's journeys and rebuild confidence. This form of mutual support aligns with feminist praxis, which emphasises collective healing and action as central to challenging systemic inequities (Hooks, 2014; United Nations Girls' Education Initiative [UNGEI], 2022). Wenger (1998) outlined several features of a CoP with which we identify. We jointly navigate our L&T journeys and, through discussion, manage to establish a shared understanding of common ground and context. In this way, our CoP acted as a counter-space that feminist voice scholars call an 'affirming epistemic space' where subjective, relational and vulnerable forms of knowing are validated (McCall, 2021; Mitchell, 2017).

We realised that our CoP is a powerful learning tool. We therefore concur with Stark and Smith that a CoP provides a valuable opportunity for professional learning independent from formal learning programmes (Stark & Smith, 2016). Having a network that understands your situation is great for mutual support. Moon's (2009) theory reminds us that such networks can scaffold academic assertiveness by building confidence, reinforcing voice and resisting self-silencing. Our CoP helped us to share perspectives, engage in conversations and question worldviews. Through a feminist praxis lens, we recognise this belonging not only as emotional support but also as an act of resistance in reclaiming space in institutions where we often feel marginalised.

Career trajectories and disrupted aspirations

Our stories also highlight the tension between carefully planned academic trajectories and the disruptive realities of institutional processes. Unexpected detours, personal hardships and structural limitations reshaped what once felt like a clear pathway to success. This disruption reflects a misalignment between institutional expectations and the lived realities of female academics, often shaped by care responsibilities, precarity and exclusion from male-dominated networks.

Both stories present a tension between planned career trajectories and the realities of institutional processes, unexpected disruptions and personal loss:

> 'I was very optimistic and still riding the PhD wave … Reflecting on this tumultuous journey, I realised how it affected my confidence.' (Author 2, Programme Coordinator, female)

Later, they lament:

> 'What more does one have to do? … The meticulously planned career trajectory seems to be unrealistic.' (Author 2, Programme Coordinator, female)

These insights reveal how institutional cultures can derail even the most strategically planned academic paths, and this is confirmed in the literature (Barnes et al., 2021). An institutional culture in support of academic career pathing includes an appreciation of equity and inclusion, as well as an ethic of care and collaboration. Moon's (2009) theory of academic assertiveness helps us understand how these repeated disruptions can erode confidence, especially for women navigating these unspoken expectations.

Feminist praxis invites institutional leaders to critically reflect on the disconnect between policy and lived experience and to centre care, recognition and equity in career development frameworks. Leaders and other role players in HE need to understand that this kind of institutional culture is needed to enable the career progression and appreciation of all academic staff.

Vulnerability as strength and reflective growth

Both authors come to view vulnerability not as weakness but as a gateway to growth, community and perspective. One drew on theory:

> 'Our shared vulnerability … affirmed the insights of Keet et al. (2009) … a pedagogy of vulnerability can foster meaningful growth.' (Author 1, Learning and Teaching Specialist, female)

The other reflected on emotional turmoil:

> 'I had several "out of body experiences" … This allowed me to get another perspective.' (Author 2, Programme Coordinator, female)

This theme reinforces the transformative power of reflection and critical engagement with difficult experiences. Reflection often becomes enriched when situated within a social context (Giddens, 1990). This was exactly our experience. Such vulnerability aligns with feminist praxis, where sharing personal experience becomes an act of collective healing (Hooks, 2014). It also echoes feminist voice theory, which values subjectivity and personal voice (Mitchell, 2017).

While vulnerability is often seen as a weakness in professional settings, our experiences suggest otherwise. Leaning into our vulnerability enabled critical self-reflection and deeper connections, transforming uncertainty into an opportunity for growth in our academic practice.

Recognition, validation and the elusiveness of success

Finally, our narratives foreground the often-discouraging pursuit of recognition within the academy. Even when institutional requirements are met or exceeded, recognition is not guaranteed. This raises critical questions about how success is measured and whose contributions are truly valued.

Despite significant achievements (PhDs, supervision, leadership roles), we both struggle to attain recognition through formal promotion processes:

> 'Despite meeting and exceeding the formal criteria for career progression, my professional growth has been hindered …' (Author 1, Learning and Teaching Specialist, female)
>
> 'I was ready … I had the feedback … I had a PhD … I was Acting HoD … and I had not met the requirements.' (Author 2, Programme Coordinator, female)

This raises questions about how success is defined, recognised and validated in academic institutions. It resonates with Buckley et al. (2000), who found that unless promotion criteria and reward structures recognise the outstanding contributions of all faculty, it is likely that there will be an imbalance in the proportion of female faculty who reach the highest ranks and assume leadership roles.

Discussion

Our CAE reflections illuminate the complex interplay between gendered structural challenges, emotional toll and the potential for growth and empowerment through peer support and critical self-reflection. These findings resonate with literature on women's experiences in academia and affirm the significance of community, dialogue and reflexivity in navigating these challenges.

The themes emerging from our stories – gendered barriers, lack of recognition, emotional exhaustion, disrupted trajectories and the healing power of connection – echo long-standing concerns in the literature on gender and academia. Studies by Buckley et al. (2000) and Clarke et al. (2024) highlight how promotion systems and notions of merit often disadvantage women, despite their equal or greater contributions. Similarly, Barnes et al. (2021) report on the ways in which institutional cultures can stifle the career progression of female academics. Our narratives offer lived testimony to these findings, contextualising them within the South African HE landscape and deepening their emotional and relational dimensions.

Our experiences affirm the importance of institutional cultures that prioritise equity, care and recognition. For university leadership, this calls for an intentional commitment to fostering inclusive academic environments where diverse identities and voices are valued. Leaders should model and support equity-driven practices that challenge traditional, often masculinised, definitions of academic success. Policy must go beyond compliance to focus on implementing tangible support structures such as mentorship programmes, reflective spaces and sustained CoPs that directly address the emotional and professional well-being of female academics. These mechanisms can mitigate the effects of imposter syndrome, particularly in male-dominated environments (Heffernan, 2020; Nwaichi, 2022; Onyegeme-Okerenta, 2022). As our journeys show, even informal peer support can have profound effects on confidence, motivation and resilience.

While our informal CoP proved transformative, it is important to note that not all CoPs yield meaningful outcomes. Pyrko et al. (2017) caution that without authentic mutual engagement and deep 'thinking together', CoPs risk becoming symbolic rather than impactful. This resonates with our experience where the depth of our reflective dialogue and shared vulnerability was the key. Bicchi (2024) highlights how CoPs can fail when perceived value is lacking or outcomes are hard to quantify, affirming our recognition that informal growth is not always visible in institutional metrics. Similarly, Noar et al. (2023) warn against too much or too little structure. Our CoP flourished because it remained purpose-driven yet flexible, allowing space for challenge and growth. These critiques remind us that the true value of a CoP lies in its relational depth, clarity of intention and commitment to mutual learning. Institutional policies must therefore centre relationality, representation and psychological safety as key components of academic development and staff retention.

This study demonstrates the power of CAE not only as a research methodology but as a vehicle for transformation. It allowed us to reflect on our lived realities while coconstructing a shared understanding of our academic identities. As Chang et al. (2013) and Denshire (2014) suggest, CAE foregrounds relational ethics, self-reflexivity and emotional authenticity. These dimensions are often marginalised in academic research. Through this method, we reclaimed our voices and reimagined our professional worth. Collaborative autoethnography thus emerges as a liberatory practice that can amplify under-represented voices and foster solidarity among academics navigating marginalised spaces.

In sum, our discussion highlights both the entrenched gender inequities in academia and the possibilities for renewal through supportive relationships and reflective methodologies. Our CoP offered validation, encouragement and a space for professional reimagining. In telling our stories, we hope to contribute to broader dialogues on how HE can become more equitable and empowering, especially for women whose confidence has been eroded by the very systems they work so hard to serve.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore how two female academics, navigating complex and often inequitable HE environments, were able to reclaim and enhance their self-confidence through critical reflection and the nurturing power of a small CoP.

Our reflections affirm that self-confidence is not a fixed trait but a dynamic and relational construct. It is constantly shaped by institutional culture, power structures and our interactions with others. Through our informal yet intentional engagements, we found a space where vulnerability was not a weakness but a catalyst for growth, connection and empowerment.

The act of co-authoring this article became a profound and healing journey. It allowed us to transform our feelings of isolation and inadequacy into a sense of purpose and belonging. We moved from silence to voice, from self-doubt to self-recognition. In sharing our stories, we hope to speak to others who may be quietly grappling with similar challenges, such as those questioning their worth in academic spaces that often overlook, marginalise or undervalue their contributions.

We conclude that while individual resilience is important, it cannot replace the urgent need for structural change. If HE institutions are to truly foster the confidence and career progression of female academics, they should dismantle exclusionary norms and practices and intentionally cultivate inclusive cultures that affirm diverse ways of knowing, being and leading. Until then, CoPs, however small or informal, remain vital spaces of hope, healing and transformation.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Anthea H.M. Jacobs: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Lucretia Z. Valentine: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available as these are reflective and experiential accounts. No external datasets were used or generated for this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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