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# Exploring homeplace as a nexus of learning and socially reproductive labour: A feminist perspective on internationalisation at a distance

F. Melis Cin<sup>1</sup>  | Markus Roos Breines<sup>2</sup>  | Parvati Raghuram<sup>3</sup>  | Ashley Gunter<sup>4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

<sup>2</sup>Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Oslo, Norway

<sup>3</sup>Department of Geography, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

<sup>4</sup>Department of Geography, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

## Correspondence

F. Melis Cin, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK.

Email: [m.cin@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:m.cin@lancaster.ac.uk)

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This paper explores the concept of homeplace, examining how it serves as a nexus for learning, reproductive labour, and internationalisation while problematising the gendered and depoliticised nature of international distance education. Drawing on 60 interviews with international distance students at a South African university, the research employs Black and critical feminist perspectives to critique how the blurred boundaries between private and public spheres shape learning experiences. It addresses a gap in the international distance education literature by highlighting the insufficient consideration of the social reproduction responsibilities played out in homeplaces. Our findings reveal that homeplace is neither a gender-neutral nor an idealised study environment. Instead, it leads to unequal participation in learning spaces and internationalisation efforts. Digital platforms, crucial for connectivity and collaboration in international education at a distance, also perpetuate gendered power dynamics that marginalise women's voices and contributions, but women, however, reach out and support each other in these online spaces. The research teases out the tensions between homeplace as a site for learning, living, and social reproduction, emphasising the need for international distance education institutions to address

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the gendered dynamics in their design and delivery that disproportionately burden those with responsibilities for social reproduction.

#### KEYWORDS

distance education, gender, higher education, homeplace, internationalisation

### Practitioner notes

What is already known about this topic

- International distance education focuses on distance education provided internationally.
- Internationalisation at a Distance (IaD) activities aim to reach a broader audience beyond local students, leveraging online and blended learning models.
- IaD activities depend on the home as one of the main spaces of study while seeing online platforms as the main point of internationalisation.
- Thus far, the literature on IaD has not undertaken a critical feminist analysis or deployed Black feminist theories to explore power relations in such spaces.

What this paper adds

- Examines how the politics of the “homeplace” can be used to understand the educational experiences of international distance education students.
- Argues that current debates often overlook how the homeplace as a gendered site influences students' international distance education journeys.
- Highlights the gendered nature of the homeplace and complexities of studying from home and online, particularly for women
- Provides a critical feminist analysis of IaD, situating and problematising the homeplace as the main site for IaD.

Implications for practice and/or policy

- Emphasises the need for institutional policies that consider the homeplace as a significant site for internationalisation at a distance.
- Recommends the development of support systems and resources to help students manage conflicting demands of home and study.
- Advocates for a more nuanced approach to distance education that addresses the diverse needs of students, including those balancing significant responsibilities like employment and family obligations.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing recognition of *internationalisation at a distance* (IaD) as an emerging and potent strategy for broadening the international reach of higher education (Ramanau, 2016). Through IaD, institutions can globalise their educational offerings while students can participate in international learning experiences without leaving their home countries, thus expanding the scope of global engagement. Mittelmeier et al. (2021) argue that IaD leverages technology and virtual platforms to offer international education without requiring physical

mobility. However, in doing so, students often access these technologies from home, itself beset with other demands associated with socially reproductive labour, such as childcare and housework. Gender operates as an important variable in these activities and therefore influences students' education journeys. Yet, the effects of social reproductive activity within the home on education have been little studied.

This paper engages feminist literature to conceptualise the place of study as one with many simultaneous demands. We draw upon black feminist critical theory to deploy the notion of homeplace to explore the inequalities but also the forms of collaboration that shape laD students' experiences. How do students navigate the homeplace as a site of these two forms of socially reproductive activity, learning and carework and what can this tell us about the gendered nature of laD? Moreover, how do homeplaces get transformed through distance education modalities such as online study and how does gender play out in these spaces? The paper addresses these questions. We argue that internationalisation extends the concept of 'homeplace' to online spaces, and show how this expanded notion—crossing international borders—can offer a supportive environment for women students and influence International Distance Education (IDE) students' journeys.

We contribute to internationalisation-at-a-distance literature (Mittelmeier et al., 2021; Ramanau, 2016) by bringing a critical feminist analysis and situating the 'homeplace' as the main site for laD. In doing so, we draw on a database of 60 interviews with international students studying at UNISA, a South African distance higher education institution and focus on laD students based in Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Namibia to explore how the politics of shape their educational experiences.

Our argument unfolds in six sections. First, we address the gendered complexities of studying from home within internationalisation at a distance. Next, we explore homeplace through Black feminist thought and key areas of analysis. After the methodology, we present empirical findings on how homeplace shapes learning and care work, providing a nuanced view of social reproduction. We then examine homeplace's role in online learning and internationalisation. Finally, we conclude with key insights, emphasising homeplace as a political concept in international distance education.

## GENDERING INTERNATIONALISATION AT A DISTANCE

laD introduces a more flexible, inclusive model that accommodates students who may face constraints in accessing physical mobility. laD is characterised by, "all forms of education across borders where students, their respective staff, and institutional provisions are separated by geographical distance and supported by technology" (Mittelmeier et al., 2019, p. 2). The activities associated with laD aim to reach a "broader audience than simply 'home' students, given the physical separation between students and their corresponding institutions, staff, or peers" (Mittelmeier et al., 2021, p. 270). Here, technology-enabled learning, along with online and blended learning models, play a crucial role as laD blurs the long-established categories of home and international mobility and immobility (Raghuram et al., 2023). It offers new insights into how internationalisation can occur in diverse ways and spaces, characterised by its unique spatiotemporality. While laD emerged as a more equitable form of internationalisation, contrasting with internationalisation abroad (IA) and internationalisation at home (laH), which have been critiqued for increasing educational inequalities (Tian et al., 2022; Waters, 2012) or for lacking culturally sensitive curricula and pedagogy, the growing body of research on laD has not focused on how gender influences the learning experiences of laD students (Breines et al., 2019; Gunter et al., 2020, 2024; Raghuram et al., 2023).

The literature on laD highlights the need to consider the distinctive needs and realities of these students, who remain in their home country while using technology-enabled tools to study

at an institution based in another country. It also emphasises the diversity and heterogeneity of the cohort of students engaged in IaD, encompassing varying class backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and disabilities, each contributing uniquely to their educational needs and experiences (Mallman & Lee, 2014; Mensink & King, 2020; Valls & Kyriakides, 2013). This group includes individuals balancing significant responsibilities such as employment, family obligations, and other personal commitments (Burton et al., 2011; Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018).

Distance education purportedly expands women's opportunities (Lee, 2017), but gender inequities limit women's full participation and benefit from education, reproducing gender norms in online and distance learning. As a result, a growing body of research indicates that distance education is highly gendered (Aneja, 2016; Gnanadass & Sanders, 2019; Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019). This research underscores the necessity of incorporating a feminist and gender analysis into the design and delivery of distance education courses. While much literature on gender and international students (eg, Zhang & Mittelmeier, 2024) focuses on women navigating gender norms in spaces of (im)mobility (Sondhi & King, 2017) and emerging masculinities (Deuchar, 2023), most studies address physical spaces in the Global North (Zhang & Xu, 2020). On the other hand, gender and distance education research has focused on performance, participation, and technology access (Aneja, 2016; Hsiao, 2021). However, within the debates on IaD, the concept of 'homeplace' emerges as a critical context for understanding how internationalisation manifests in in-between spaces, places and virtual networks. IaD offers a new dimension to these discussions, as the home becomes not merely a backdrop to learning but an active space where international experiences, educational practices, and gendered dynamics converge. As a result, and unlike usual classroom settings, distance education requires students to manage their own schedules and find time for study amidst other responsibilities. For women, this often means negotiating time for academic work alongside household duties and childcare. The home, usually a site of conflicting demands and stress (Shrivastava & Shrivastava, 2014) around reproductive work, has to also become a study environment.

The paper examines how "home" is negotiated within the context of global distance education. [Correction added on 15 January 2025, after first online publication: In the preceding sentence, 'the home and online spaces how gender is negotiated in' has been corrected to "'home" is negotiated within the context of', in this version.]. It emphasises the home as key to understanding the social and spatial dynamics of education, linking home-based learning to broader socio-political relations. South Africa's role as a hub for international students provides insights into using the concept of 'homeplace' to analyse gender inequities in the context of internationalisation in the Global South, especially within international distance education.

## CONCEPTUALISING THE HOMEPLACE THROUGH BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

In this paper, we build upon Black feminist thinking on homeplace. Discussions surrounding the home as a contested space have largely focused on its role in shaping social relations (Massey, 1994) or on understanding the social and spatial dimensions of identity (Blunt, 2005). Theorisations of home have been prominent in feminist geography, cultural sociology and postcolonial studies (see Ahmed, 1999; Collins, 2009; Massey, 1994), where it is often defined in terms of the reproduction of embodied expectations, a site of gendered oppression, or a space of belonging and alienation.

However, Black feminist thought has expanded this thinking through the notion of homeplace. bell hooks (1990) identifies homeplace as "a site of liberation and resistance" (p. 43). Homeplace embodies two centrepieces of Africana thought, socio-economic and cultural racial oppression, and resistance. Homeplaces are spaces of safety, often nurtured by women. For hooks, her grandmother's home was such a space of refuge. Surrounded

by a tightknit community she was safe to explore her surroundings, despite the racist laws prevalent at that time in the US which limited black people's mobilities. Her grandmother, like many other black women, created this space of safety. These spaces were also community oriented spaces, rather than those which fostered distinctiveness and individuality. The women recognised that social reproduction of society within these contexts requires care beyond the self.

This notion of homeplace has been developed in a number of empirical studies. King and Ferguson (2006) carried out a set of interviews with African American women who showed how women make the homeplace through sacrifice in order to create a nurturing space not only for those they look after but also for themselves. Thus, social reproduction within these households becomes part of the act of caring for oneself. Other black writers have expanded on this to think about the homeplace beyond the home. For instance, Mogadime (2000) shows how black teachers act as 'othermothers', providing refuge within the classroom for girls who are faced with gendered racism. Similarly, Calafell (2007) talks about how African American academics mentor each other within the university's racialised hierarchies and how these relationships nurture both the mentor and mentee. Homeplaces thus extend far beyond the boundaries of the home.

Homeplaces as educational settings got a different flavour during COVID-19. Coleman-King et al. (2023) discuss how being able to work from home may have put pressures on women, but that for black women, who are often over-burdened with paid work outside the house in low paying sectors, the opportunity to work from home and to look after their children at the same time, gave them the opportunity to build resistance and resilience in their children to the racism of the world outside. They deploy the use of homeplace and the extent to which socially reproductive work was an act of resistance and not just a chore. It reaffirms hooks's insights that subjugation at home can however become a liberatory act, one where motherhood and sisterhood is developed. Many of these writings occur in the context of African women's experiences of racism in the US. However, an increasing body of work aims to connect this to black experiences globally (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019; Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021), while also recognising the extent to which these experiences of racism are deeply shaped by the poor socio-economic outcomes that black people often face everywhere. They also point to how the home can be deeply fractured, as racism and socio-economic inequities penetrate household boundaries and the tightknit communities of some of the African literature in the US (Castelyn, 2003).

Building on this scholarship, we position our research at the intersection of feminist literature on the homeplace (Gouthro, 2009) and internationalisation at a distance (Mittelmeier et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2023). We argue that using homeplace as a tool for thinking about women and men facing socio-economic disadvantages at home, may help us to view their socially reproductive work in a positive light. In doing so, we offer an analytical gesture which goes beyond seeing social reproduction within the home as separate from and antithetical to education. This is particularly important in the case of distance education because home is also the site of study, another form of social reproduction, which has its own requirements and limits. We argue that the use of feminist theory can expand the analytical parameters through which gendered experiences are usually seen and in this paper, we do this by intersecting this with the internationalisation at a distance debates.

## HOMEPLACE AS GENDERED SPACES OF LEARNING AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

As IaD increasingly integrates global educational frameworks with students' domestic environments, the homeplace becomes not only a site of learning but also a space where

gendered norms are negotiated, reinforced or challenged. This makes the homeplace a critical focal point for understanding the gendered dimensions of IaD. These dimensions occur both within the home and within the virtual sphere. Cultural expectations around gender vary widely across contexts but these students have to engage each other in IaD. Students engage with digital platforms that often lack the immediacy of face-to-face interactions, and this can potentially flatten or amplify gendered expressions of identity. This dynamic reshapes how students present themselves, navigate online learning environments, and negotiate their identities in ways that are distinct from campus-based international education. By bringing together the lenses of gender, homeplace and internationalisation at a distance, we can deepen our understanding of how international students—particularly women—experience education in physical and virtual spaces.

IaD offers a unique opportunity to reconceptualise the home as a fluid, gendered, and globalised space of learning, where students constantly navigate the complexities of social reproduction alongside academic engagement. In this reimagining of homeplace, we also build on Gouthro's conceptualisation of homeplace in education. She based her arguments on critical theorist Habermas (1987) and examines how educational, political, and social structures invade the lifeworld, impacting the everyday experiences of homes and shaping and regulating daily relations and communications. In doing so, she embeds a feminist critique of Habermas's theory in thinking about the homeplace for adult students.

In this article, the homeplace is deployed to flesh out the complexities of gender differences in institutionalised education contexts, where the home also emerges as a site of learning. Critical feminists, such as Prokhovnik (2012) and Fraser (2020), have long critiqued the boundary between the private sphere of home and the public realm, arguing that masculinities in the public sphere permeate both sites, reinforcing ideal femininities. This is why Gouthro (2005, 2009) brings up an analysis of the homeplace as critical to mature students' experiences, as gendered roles and relationships, along with paid and unpaid labour, intersect yet remain undebated and untroubled. Therefore, our analysis will be guided by three overarching areas threaded across the narratives below.

First, we will highlight how identities and roles within the home, such as mothers, sisters, and fathers, enter learning spaces but are often overlooked in distance education (Gouthro, 2009). The home, as the initial site of learning, shapes roles and responsibilities, making it both a nurturing and fractured environment, particularly for mature learners adjusting their educational aspirations due to private sphere demands (Gouthro, 2005, 2007). Second, relationships within the home significantly impact learning experiences, with decisions about learning formats and engagement shaped by familial obligations and caregiving responsibilities, which differ across gender and socio-economic status (Heenan, 2002). These roles, though gendered, are often embraced as part of social reproduction. Third, relationships outside the home are equally important, as distance education requires high structure and interaction, with women navigating time zones, cultural differences, and institutional support to build supportive peer networks, which are crucial for overcoming isolation in online settings (Dron, 2019; Gnanadass & Sanders, 2019; Rourke et al., 1999). Fourth, socially reproductive labour underpins both homeplace as a site of resistance and education, and any analysis of international, mature or distance students that neglects the homeplace fails to fully address the conditions under which learning occurs (Welsh, 2024).

## METHODOLOGY

This study is part of the IDEAS project, which investigates UNISA's role as a provider of distance education (DE) in Africa. This paper focuses on the qualitative component of the research, specifically interviews conducted with international distance education (IDE)

students at UNISA. Data were collected between 2018 and 2019, ensuring that the findings reflect student experiences before the pandemic's impact on educational practices. This pre-COVID-19 data offers an understanding of IDE students' experiences, unaltered by the forced shift to online learning during the pandemic.

Participants were purposefully selected from a pool of 1295 UNISA students who completed a preliminary survey, which collected broad information on student experiences and enabled the identification of students for the qualitative interviews. Sixty participants were chosen from this group based on their relevance to the study's research questions. The students chosen were engaged in IDE while residing in their home countries. They also offer a diverse and representative sample of students from Zimbabwe, Namibia and Nigeria to ensure the study focused on those navigating the complexities of cross-border DE, aligning with UNISA's international student profile.

Participants were contacted via email after voluntarily providing their details in the survey, and interviews were conducted via Skype by a team of six postdoctoral researchers based in South Africa and the UK. We employed a transnational online research using Skype-to-phone interviewing, ensuring the global reach of the research (Cin et al., 2023). The interview protocols were designed to explore three key themes: migration, social media use and student adjustment and learning experiences, reflecting the multifaceted nature of balancing study with personal and professional responsibilities.

To analyse the data, we employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which followed a two-step approach. First, we conducted an inductive analysis to identify overarching themes related to student learning experiences and adjustments. Codes and themes emerged organically from the data, focusing on how students navigated the challenges of DE. This was followed by a deductive analysis guided by our feminist theoretical framework outlined above, examining intersections of gender, homeplace, and internationalisation. The overarching themes and codes were developed through iterative coding cycles. Initial open coding led to refined themes during the deductive phase. Key themes include 'Homeplace as a Site of Learning and Care', 'Gendered Experiences of Learning', and 'Online Learning Spaces as Extensions of Homeplace', each linked to specific codes such as 'domestic labour', 'study-care balance' and 'digital marginalisation'.

To ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the analysis, several strategies were employed: all six researchers reviewed the codes to reduce bias, peer debriefing sessions were conducted to refine the coding framework and member checking was used, inviting participants to review and verify the accuracy of the identified themes. Although the full sample consisted of 165 student interviews, during the coding phase, we narrowed our focus to three specific thematic areas, reducing our sample to 60 interviews. We acknowledge the limitation of concentrating on only 60 participants, as this allowed for in-depth exploration but may have led to broader patterns across the entire dataset being overlooked.

## NAVIGATING BOUNDARIES: HOMEPLACE AS A SITE OF LEARNING AND CARE

Many of the international and mature higher education students studying at a distance were using home as a site of learning for their studies. As students perceive the homeplace as a learning site, they navigate two intersecting boundaries: one between home and paid labour, and the other between home and their care responsibilities. These boundary crossings are significantly influenced by the marketplace, shaping educational discourse and determining what is valued in learning, illustrating a "masculine value orientation that dismisses gender differences in living and learning experiences connected with the homeplace"



(Gouthro, 2005, p. 7). Thus, the discourse of international distance education becomes deeply embedded in the economic narrative of 'learning while earning' (Raddon, 2007, p. 159), in which unpaid labour is largely ignored.

Our data show that both for men and women, the home became a site of learning through the shifting boundaries of identities and responsibilities. They had to negotiate work-related responsibilities alongside home learning responsibilities, which disrupted the traditional boundaries between study, work and home. In particular, women often have to negotiate multifaceted identities in order to study, but in doing so, they rely heavily on familial relationships. For instance, Mary, a woman student from Zimbabwe, illustrates this dependency by stating that she relies on her sister to facilitate her studies at home. The transfer of social reproductive duties from one woman to another, and the community building that hooks (1990) speaks about were evident in our study:

After work, I have to get home, do whatever needs to be prepared and then I study after that... and I have my sister to help me during the day with the little ones.

On the one hand, the gendered significance of identities and relationships within the home environment is particularly pronounced, as these socially constructed responsibilities, centered around domestic labour and caregiving, significantly impact women's participation in distance education and community-based learning initiatives. While such educational formats may ostensibly provide more equitable access opportunities, gendered expectations within the home environment often undermine this potential. Women frequently find themselves negotiating priorities, often placing family responsibilities over their educational pursuits. On the other hand, they also supported each other to help to meet their goals, creating informal networks of resilience.

While women commonly spoke about juggling their studies with reproductive labour, men often had different options. For instance, Oke, a Nigerian male student, mentioned that although he tries to work from home, he prefers the workplace due to the quietness it offers compared to the home.

Mostly my best time to study is, as a matter of fact, in the workplace because when I'm out of my home and in the workplace then I have the quietness of the room for myself, but in the house my children will just come around, they want to know what you're doing, why you're not playing with them, etc. They have to share the time, so when I'm at home, there's not much concentration, but when I'm out at work, it's better for me.

Oke's narrative highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of home, particularly as a space that is both productive and laden with demands related to social reproduction. Oke expresses a desire to separate the home—a site of social reproduction—from learning. His ability to make this separation reveals the privilege of mobility and choice which is not afforded to all students.

Likewise, Tendayi, a Zimbabwean male student, highlighted the negotiations he must make within the home, which became a suitable space for study only when there are no caregiving responsibilities involved.

I study at home in the evening or sometimes when everyone is gone home, I study in my office, that's where I study. During the weekends there is a college that is nearby, I just ask them to have some time for study. I utilise some of their classrooms there.

These dynamics highlight the complexities and challenges faced by students who must navigate multiple roles and responsibilities within the same physical space. Through temporal strategies, students use the same space for study but only at times when there are no immediate demands related to social reproduction. The home, therefore, shifts in its function and meaning depending on who is present and what is expected, further emphasising both its adaptability and the inherent difficulties of balancing academic work with domestic responsibilities. These temporal manoeuvres expose the invisible labour that sustains the home, where caregiving, household duties, and learning must coexist. For many female students, this balancing act is more fraught, as social reproductive labour is often constant and heavily gendered. Yet, as illustrated by both Oke and Tendayi, homeplace learning is managed by either shifting to different physical spaces or adjusting their schedules to accommodate these overlapping demands.

However, often the stories were far more mixed. For example, Patience, another Zimbabwean woman student shared the reproductive work with her husband:

Sometimes [I study] at home. My husband takes care of the kids on Saturdays and I go to the library on Saturday from 8.00am to 3.00pm and then by 3.30pm I will be home with the kids. On Sunday we will be together with them.

Patience's experience is far from unique; it reflects a broader trend among many women engaged in distance education to share reproductive work. For students engaged in IaD, the home becomes not only a site of academic engagement but also a space of negotiation, where they reconcile the demands of internationalised education with the socio-cultural and economic realities of their local environments and home in which relationships play a significant role. It overturns the notion of patriarchy as the dominant mode through which African men's relation to home is often portrayed. Thus, while many women students have expressed how they divide time between childcare, household responsibilities, and their learning, men also engage daily with the crossing identities of being both a parent and a student. For example, Chidi, a Nigerian male student, highlighted this dual role, illustrating the complex interplay between personal and academic responsibilities in the homeplace.

As a family man, automatically once I realised that you cannot simply say because you're studying, you leave some aspect of your responsibility in terms of being there for the family when it is needed; being there for the children when it matters most; checking their homework; checking to ensure that whatever they need is being taken care of... when I need to study, I study hard and funnily enough the children are aware that Daddy is working, Daddy is doing homework because to them that's what they understand, when you're with your book, they believe you're doing your homework.

This example shows that men too were involved in childcare and day-to-day household practices. Although IaD operates under the assumption that students have choices regarding their study-work-home boundaries, these choices are significantly influenced by their degree of identification with particular roles (Ashforth et al., 2000). These examples challenge the notion that men exert full control over the temporality and spatiality of these roles, rather suggesting (Fonner & Stache, 2012) that social reproduction is important for both women and men. Biological reproduction however places additional pressure on women, as seen in Chipso's case, a Zimbabwean student who failed her modules after taking a break for childbirth with no chance for make-up exams.

I'm now married so I've got a child, and we still support home here and there, my parents, and we do support as well for my in-laws but yeah so I've got responsibilities as well. I only ... you know, when I got my baby <laughs> things changed. I even failed some of my modules because balancing, you know, having a baby, because I gave birth to my baby last year in May so - you know - sometimes I had to feed, wake up, feed, and study at the same time, and adjusting to that wasn't easy <laughs> because I gave birth during exam time on the day that I had exams. I'm sure you can hear my baby crying in the background?

Chipo's experience highlights that distance education often overlooks the complexities of home learning, failing to recognise it as a site where labour and social reproductive demands intersect (Gouthro, 2009). Given that these forms of education operate on the premise that the home is a primary learning site (Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2002), it is essential for educational institutions to address gendered and class-based differences in learning experiences. IaD can sometimes appear as a depoliticised private space, where students may be penalised for unpaid care work if domestic and caregiving responsibilities are treated as personal matters. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensuring equitable access to education. While gendered hierarchies often operate within the home, it can also serve as a place of resistance and nurturance (hooks, 1990) against gendered oppression in other learning spaces. Students, who often balance multiple roles and responsibilities alongside socio-economic and infrastructural challenges, may still view the home as a safe space, especially when faced with inequalities in online education. In this context, students navigate different cultural expectations of race and gender within a larger international learning community, as we further explore below.

## HOMEPLACE AND GENDERED DYNAMICS IN ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING SPACES

Homeplace as a learning space also serves as a platform for students to engage with their international peers across different countries through synchronous and asynchronous online discussions, online forums, digital platforms such as WhatsApp, and social media networks like Facebook groups (Madge et al., 2019). However, this is contingent upon students' access to resources and internet connectivity at home. Our research identifies three ways in which this internationalisation occurs in distinctly gendered terms, a topic not extensively covered in the existing literature. While student engagement through online platforms has significantly influenced their experiences of internationalisation—such as accessing materials and resources (Gunter et al., 2024; Gunter & Raghuram, 2018) or developing social bonds to support one another—the extent to which these interactions occur is notably gendered.

Firstly, our research shows that women's choices regarding their online presence are often constrained by household responsibilities. At home, women tend to prioritise their limited time and space for studying and completing assignments over connecting with other students, unless for urgent matters like accessing resources or exam-related queries. This highlights how the homeplace as a learning site impacts the extent of internationalisation at a distance for women. Consequently, these platforms do not offer equal participation opportunities (Foli, 2022), revealing that women have different IDE learning experiences than men, often overlooked in the internationalisation agenda. The 'flexibility' of IaD may be compromised by unpaid care work, limited access to technology, or infrastructural issues like electricity shortages (Madge et al., 2019), as noted by Kwaku, a Nigerian male student.

(...) the internet, the light, everything that's missing at home, most of the time there's no electrical activity, there's a poor power supply in the country so there's no light.

In this sense, the homeplace operates as a dual space: on the one hand, it offers the possibility of educational pursuit and global engagement without the need for physical relocation; on the other, it exposes the deeply embedded inequalities—such as gendered labour divisions and socio-economic pressures—that affect how students experience distance learning.

Secondly, these online spaces are sometimes perceived as masculine and unwelcoming to women students. It is important to note that the students whom we talked to mostly depended on non-institutionalised forms of online social space rather than the formal ones set up by UNISA. Some women reported that they rarely receive responses and feel uncomfortable in these online spaces and may even have unpleasant experiences. For example, Farai, a Zimbabwean woman, described her discomfort and alienation:

What I've discovered is sometimes the other guys., sometimes they are sort of like bullish (...)you can actually get an idea that, you know, this one is the man and this one is the woman (...) Usually sometimes people might abuse, and this a thing that other guys do, like if they discover that this lady is beautiful some of the guys they might (...) try to ask for other favours other than school.

These kinds of experiences discourage women from engaging with other students through social media accounts and WhatsApp groups. Although such experiences are relatively few, women also opt out from spaces by not receiving a response as raised by More, a male Zimbabwean student:

I remember this other time when something happened in the group and people were not really like helpful to one of the ladies. She asked a question, and no one really answered. So I had to take up the task and actually come forth and explain to her why it may be they were not responding.

Feminist critical theory (Fraser, 2017; Landes, 1995) argues that women's contributions are often undervalued, as seen in their struggle for equity and recognition in online learning spaces. These spaces are shaped by gendered power dynamics, silencing women's participation (Cole, 2015). Black feminist literature (Collins, 2022) extends this by showing how gendered and racialised silencing reinforces systemic inequalities across both virtual and physical spaces.

Thirdly, this exclusion has also encouraged many women to adopt more strategic approaches in establishing relationships with other international students, often choosing to work with other women and form supportive communities. They foster a sense of shared experience and mutual inspiration, forming collective homeplaces (García, 2017) where they create bonds to protect and support one another (Welsh, 2024). Anesu, a Zimbabwean woman, narrates this as follows:

Well I've saved a couple of numbers in my phone, not necessarily just for WhatsApp, and I contact certain ladies there on a regular basis just to keep in touch and ... I think it's two ladies that we were doing the same module last year, and this year not, but I'm still in contact with them ... they always reach out, and while the one doesn't work the other one has her own company and she kind of motivates me as well because she has her own company, she's doing LLB, she has a family, she has three kids, and I tell myself, if this person can do it, I'm not different from her.

Likewise, Angela, another women student talked about how effective such connection could be when they have found other women students with whom they connect, enabling, laD students, to transfer knowledge and different digital resources between each other and thus mediating their distance from the university (Madge et al., 2019). The relationships formed through these exchanges also created a collaborative or communal learning space, as narrated by a woman Namibian student, Kudzai.

We use WhatsApp as a mode of communication. We have actually managed to connect to each other in such a beautiful way. We know each other through social media. We haven't met socially, but we communicate and we're actually like a family. We assist each other, we give each other ideas, we debate, we help each other in areas of weakness all through social media, all through the WhatsApp.

Such online groups encourage the development of educational micro-communities and fosters student learning (Bosch, 2009; Gachago et al., 2015). The connections mitigate the issues of being far away from the institution as they get support on more practical issues (Wang et al., 2012). Gamba, a Zimbabwean women student says:

Most of the students are in South Africa, when they go for their own queries at the university, for instance, you know you're fortunate enough for them to help you. Just give them the student number and then they communicate to you via WhatsApp. And the others were on Facebook, there's also a support on Facebook. Well, sometimes we don't get the support we get because I guess we are foreigners and sometimes we do. So, I guess it all depends on your relationship with those people. For instance, I formed a couple of relationships with some ladies that I've studied with, so whenever I'm stuck and I need something from the university, because they have access to the university they actually try and help out at the same time.

If the homeplace is a space of care, then the virtual homeplace transcends international boundaries, emerging from the challenges and pressures faced by female international students. This space becomes vital for sharing and support, maintaining social reproduction through education as women assist one another. These online communities extend the homeplace, providing care and solidarity, helping women navigate the complexities of laD. However, the question remains: how can these spaces be institutionalised, and how can we remove the masculinities that limit women's participation in online learning?

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have approached internationalisation at a distance from a Black feminist perspective to understand how the homeplace shapes learners' experiences, their journey of 'internationalisation,' and the conditions under which this takes place. We observe that there is a constant boundary crossing between identities governed by relationships in the homeplace, alongside paid and unpaid responsibilities, which has several significant implications.

This study offers insights into the intersection of gender, learning, and domestic responsibilities in IDE. IDE's flexibility should not be seen as simply widening participation, as unpaid care work and household dynamics often limit study time. Gouthro (2005) highlights the need to value gendered homeplace experiences of care, often overlooked

in both IDE and the marketplace. As a primary learning site, the home must be acknowledged as more than a private matter. IDE must recognise gender differences, unpaid labour and social reproduction as integral, not just obstacles. Both domestic and online homeplaces are crucial for democratising education and fostering active citizenship. Our study shows the homeplace as a mediator of global knowledge, reflecting the socio-cultural dynamics of students' lived realities. The relationship between homeplace and laD challenges us to rethink the spatial and social dimensions of education, revealing the home as an active, socially constructed learning space. It also showcases caring masculinities within the context of social reproduction.

One outcome of our study is that institutions that offer laD must rethink their frameworks for support, recognising that the homeplace is not merely a backdrop for learning but a space fraught with complexities. This necessitates developing gender-sensitive policies and practices that acknowledge and mitigate the domestic pressures faced by students, offering alternatives such as asynchronous learning, flexible assessment options, and institutional support for balancing study with caregiving or other household responsibilities. Without addressing these issues, laD risks perpetuating the very inequalities it seeks to overcome by failing to account for the realities of homeplace learning, particularly for students navigating multiple, intersecting responsibilities. Moreover, the literature on laD needs to acknowledge the complexity of gendered experiences in online spaces where internationalisation occurs. When women face exclusion, silences or gendered interactions, it undermines the goal of inclusive internationalisation. If laD is a space for knowledge construction and transfer (Yue et al., 2023), unequal power dynamics create an uneven internationalisation. However, women also form supportive bonds, transforming online spaces into homeplaces of care. Recognising these dynamics is key to creating a more equitable international distance education that truly addresses the diverse challenges faced by all students, particularly women.

Ultimately, the lessons drawn from this analysis have global relevance, urging a shift toward more comprehensive and equitable approaches to international distance education. By addressing the diverse challenges and experiences of students, particularly women, who study within the homeplace, we can work toward an inclusive model of internationalisation that better reflects the realities of students in various domestic and international contexts.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in UK Data Reshare at <https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/>.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The project was given approval by the University of South African research permission sub-committee of the Senate Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation

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## ORCID

F. Melis Cin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6015-0447>

Markus Roos Breines  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7570-9354>

Parvati Raghuram  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1841-5613>

Ashley Gunter  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0993-0955>

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