

## REVISITING THE 1994 DEMOCRATIC IDEAL: ASSESSING PROGRESS TOWARD A NON-SEXIST, NON-RACIAL AND DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA

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Article Received: 23 November 2025, Article Revised: 13 December 2025, Published on: 03 January 2026

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.7338>

### ABSTRACT:

South Africa's 1994 democratic transition was anchored in the promise of building a society that is non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic. More than three decades later, questions persist regarding the extent to which this vision has been realised in practice. This article critically examines progress and limitations in achieving these foundational ideals. Using a qualitative document analysis approach, the study draws on constitutional provisions, official government reports, policy documents, and recent peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2020 and 2024. The findings reveal a complex and uneven trajectory. While South Africa has made notable institutional and legal advances, including a progressive Constitution, expanded political participation, and formal gender equality frameworks, deep structural inequalities remain entrenched. Racialised socio-economic disparities, persistent gender-based violence, unequal access to quality education and employment, and declining

public trust in democratic institutions suggest a significant gap between constitutional ideals and lived realities. The article argues that the persistence of apartheid era structural legacies, combined with governance failures and elite driven political practices, has constrained transformative outcomes. The study contributes to ongoing debates by offering an integrated assessment of non-racialism, non-sexism, and democratic consolidation rather than treating them as separate policy domains. The article concludes that while the 1994 vision has not collapsed, it remains only partially fulfilled, requiring renewed political will, ethical leadership, and inclusive socio-economic reforms to move closer to its original emancipatory promise.

**KEYWORDS:** Democratic consolidation; Non-racialism; Non-sexism; Post-apartheid South Africa; Social justice.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 represented a historic and symbolic break from centuries of colonialism and nearly five decades of formal apartheid rule, a system characterised by racial hierarchy, political exclusion, and institutionalised violence (Southall, 2021). The transition was not merely a change in government but an attempt to fundamentally reorder society through a constitutional democracy rooted in equality, dignity, and universal citizenship. Central to this transformation was the explicit rejection of racial domination, patriarchal governance, and authoritarian state power, which had defined the apartheid regime and shaped social relations across generations (Seekings & Nattrass, 2022). The negotiated settlement that led to the first democratic elections sought to balance political reconciliation with social justice, placing significant moral and political weight on the idea of a shared, inclusive future. The African National Congress, alongside its alliance partners and broader liberation movements, articulated a vision of a non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic South Africa as both a moral imperative and a political foundation for nation-building (ANC, 2022). This vision was grounded in the belief that political freedom would be incomplete without social and economic transformation, particularly for those historically marginalised on the basis of race and gender. These aspirations were formally entrenched in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which remains widely regarded as one of the most progressive constitutions globally due to its strong emphasis on human rights, equality before the law, and participatory democracy (Venter & Landsberg, 2023). The

Constitution established legal protections against discrimination, affirmed gender equality, and created independent institutions intended to safeguard democratic governance.

However, more than three decades after the democratic breakthrough, South Africa continues to grapple with deep and persistent social and political challenges that complicate any straightforward assessment of democratic success. Extreme socio-economic inequality remains a defining feature of South African society, with the country consistently ranked among the most unequal in the world (Statistics South Africa, 2023). These inequalities remain strongly racialised, reflecting the enduring structural legacy of apartheid-era dispossession, spatial segregation, and unequal access to quality education and employment opportunities (Seekings & Nattrass, 2022). While a growing Black middle class has emerged since 1994, poverty and unemployment remain disproportionately concentrated among Black South Africans, particularly in rural areas and urban townships. Gender inequality further underscores the tension between constitutional ideals and lived realities. Despite significant gains in women's political representation and progressive gender equality legislation, South Africa continues to experience alarmingly high levels of gender-based violence and femicide (Hassim, Gouws, & Mkhize, 2021). Women, especially those from poor and working-class backgrounds, remain overrepresented in precarious employment and unpaid care work, limiting their full participation in the economy and public life (Budlender, 2022). These patterns raise serious questions about the extent to which non-sexism has been realised beyond formal legal frameworks.

At the same time, concerns about the quality and sustainability of South Africa's democracy have intensified in recent years. Declining voter turnout, growing public dissatisfaction with political leadership, and widespread perceptions of corruption have contributed to what some scholars describe as democratic fatigue or erosion (Mattes, 2022). The findings of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture highlighted the extent to which state institutions were weakened through patronage networks and abuse of power, undermining public trust and accountability (Zondo Commission, 2022). Although South Africa continues to hold regular elections and maintain an independent judiciary, these developments suggest that procedural democracy has not always translated into effective and responsive governance. Within scholarly debates, there is increasing recognition that the democratic project in South Africa cannot be evaluated solely through institutional or electoral measures. Instead, attention has shifted toward the gap between the country's normative democratic

framework and the everyday experiences of its citizens (Southall, 2021). For many South Africans, particularly the youth, democracy has become associated with unmet expectations, economic insecurity, and limited social mobility rather than liberation and opportunity (Graham & Mcebisi, 2023). This growing disjuncture has fuelled social unrest, community protests, and renewed contestation over the meaning of freedom and equality in the post-apartheid era.

The central problem addressed in this article is this widening gap between South Africa's constitutional promises and the lived realities of inequality, exclusion, and institutional fragility. While the ideals of non-racialism, non-sexism, and democracy remain foundational to the country's political identity, their practical realisation appears uneven and contested. This raises critical questions about whether these ideals have been substantively achieved or whether they remain aspirational principles constrained by structural and political limitations. The objective of this study is therefore:

- To critically assess the extent to which South Africa has realised the vision of a non-sexist, non-racial, and democratic society as articulated in 1994. The article seeks to examine how historical legacies, socio-economic structures, and governance dynamics have shaped contemporary outcomes, and to identify areas where progress has stalled or regressed.

The guiding research question is:

To what extent has South Africa achieved the non-sexist, non-racial, and democratic society envisioned at the dawn of democracy? By addressing this question, the study aims to contribute to ongoing academic and policy debates on democratic consolidation, social justice, and transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Scholarly engagement with South Africa's post-1994 trajectory has increasingly converged on the view that the democratic project remains unresolved, deeply contested, and structurally constrained. While the transition from apartheid to democracy was widely celebrated as a global moral triumph, contemporary literature reflects growing scepticism about whether the foundational ideals of non-racialism, non-sexism, and democracy have been substantively realised in everyday social, economic, and political life (Southall, 2021; Mattes, 2022). Rather than framing South Africa's experience as a simple success or failure, recent scholarship emphasises contradiction, unevenness, and regression alongside undeniable

institutional gains. This literature review synthesises contemporary academic debates on democratic consolidation, non-racialism, and non-sexism in South Africa, while advancing the researchers' position that these dimensions cannot be meaningfully assessed in isolation. The researchers introduce a relational and structural reading of the literature, arguing that the endurance of inequality and exclusion reflects not only policy shortcomings but also the limits of elite-driven transformation within a deeply unequal political economy.

### **Democratic Consolidation and Institutional Fragility**

A substantial body of contemporary scholarship has shifted attention away from the mere existence of democratic institutions in South Africa toward a deeper interrogation of their quality, resilience, and social legitimacy. Rather than questioning whether South Africa remains a democracy in formal terms, recent literature asks whether democratic practices are consolidating in ways that sustain accountability, participation, and trust over time (Southall, 2021). This shift reflects broader concerns within comparative politics that young and middle-income democracies may retain electoral procedures while experiencing gradual institutional erosion and declining public confidence. Southall (2021) argues that South Africa has entered a period of democratic vulnerability characterised by the persistence of constitutional institutions alongside weakening ethical leadership and increasing elite dominance. According to this view, the formal architecture of democracy, including Parliament, the courts, and independent oversight bodies, remains intact, but their capacity to constrain power and respond to citizens has been uneven. Patronage networks, factional contestation within the governing party, and blurred lines between party and state have placed sustained pressure on institutional integrity. Southall (2021) emphasises that democratic fragility in South Africa does not take the form of authoritarian rupture but rather manifests through incremental decay that is difficult to reverse.

This argument is reinforced by Lodge (2022), who situates contemporary democratic challenges within the political settlement that emerged during the transition to democracy. Lodge (2022) contends that the post-apartheid settlement prioritised political stability, reconciliation, and elite accommodation in order to avoid large-scale conflict. While this approach succeeded in ensuring a peaceful transition, it also limited opportunities for deepening participatory democracy and strengthening downward accountability. Over time, this settlement fostered a political culture in which citizens were positioned primarily as voters rather than as active participants in governance, thereby weakening democratic

engagement beyond elections. Empirical evidence from Afrobarometer surveys has played a central role in documenting these trends. Mattes (2022) provides robust longitudinal data showing a steady decline in public trust toward key democratic institutions, including Parliament, political parties, and local government. Importantly, Mattes (2022) demonstrates that this erosion of trust is most pronounced among younger citizens, who have no direct memory of apartheid and therefore evaluate democracy primarily through present-day socio-economic outcomes. This finding challenges narratives that attribute declining trust to political immaturity or apathy, instead pointing to rational assessments of institutional performance.

Mattes (2022) further argues that dissatisfaction with democracy in South Africa reflects frustration with how democratic institutions function rather than rejection of democracy as a normative ideal. Survey respondents continue to express strong support for democratic principles such as free elections and civil liberties, even as confidence in political elites declines. This distinction is significant because it suggests that democratic legitimacy has been weakened at the level of governance outcomes rather than values. Democracy remains aspirational, but its delivery is increasingly contested. Youth-focused scholarship reinforces this interpretation. Graham and Mcebisi (2023) find that young South Africans are not disengaging from democracy because they prefer authoritarian alternatives, but because they experience democracy as disconnected from economic opportunity and social mobility. High unemployment, perceived corruption, and limited access to meaningful participation have contributed to a sense of political marginalisation. Graham and Mcebisi (2023) argue that youth disillusionment should be understood as a structural response to exclusion rather than as generational indifference.

Declining electoral participation has emerged as another key indicator of democratic fragility. Schulz-Herzenberg (2023) documents a sustained decline in voter turnout since the 1999 national elections, with particularly low participation among younger and urban voters. She interprets this trend as evidence of a shift away from liberation-based political loyalty toward more conditional forms of engagement. Citizens are increasingly willing to withhold electoral participation when they perceive political parties as unresponsive or unaccountable. The meaning of abstention remains contested within the literature. While some scholars interpret declining turnout as apathy or disengagement, others offer a more nuanced reading. Booysen (2021) argues that non-voting can function as a form of silent protest in contexts where

citizens feel that electoral participation does not translate into substantive change. From this perspective, abstention reflects political consciousness rather than withdrawal, signalling dissatisfaction with governance rather than indifference to democracy itself.

The phenomenon of state capture has further intensified concerns about democratic consolidation. Following the release of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, extensive scholarly analysis has examined how corruption and patronage networks undermined institutional capacity and accountability (Zondo Commission, 2022). The Commission's findings revealed systematic interference in public procurement, the hollowing out of state-owned enterprises, and the erosion of oversight mechanisms. These developments weakened citizens' trust in the state's ability to act in the public interest. Chipkin and Swilling (2022) offer a particularly influential interpretation of state capture, arguing that it should be understood as a systemic reconfiguration of power rather than as isolated criminal behaviour. They contend that state capture blurred the boundary between public authority and private accumulation, embedding corruption within governance structures themselves. This analysis shifts the focus away from individual moral failure toward structural incentives within South Africa's political economy that enable abuse of power.

The researchers align with this structural interpretation but extends it by foregrounding the role of persistent social exclusion in shaping democratic fragility. Democratic erosion in South Africa cannot be fully understood without considering the material conditions under which citizenship is exercised. Where poverty, unemployment, and inequality remain widespread, democratic participation is constrained, and trust in institutions is difficult to sustain. In this sense, democracy is weakened not only by corruption but by its limited capacity to deliver tangible improvements in everyday life. Seekings and Nattrass (2022) argue that extreme inequality poses a fundamental challenge to democratic consolidation by concentrating economic and political power in the hands of a narrow elite. When economic exclusion persists along racial and class lines, formal political equality risks becoming disconnected from lived experience. Southall (2021) similarly cautions that procedural democracy without substantive socio-economic transformation risks becoming symbolically hollow, particularly in societies marked by deep historical injustice.

Taken together, the literature suggests that South Africa's democratic challenges are best understood as the outcome of interacting political, economic, and social dynamics rather than



institutional failure alone. Democratic consolidation has stalled not because elections have ceased or constitutional norms have collapsed, but because democracy has struggled to translate political inclusion into material and social justice. This insight underscores the importance of analysing democratic fragility alongside inequality and exclusion, rather than treating political institutions as autonomous from their socio-economic context.

### **Non-Racialism and the Persistence of Racialised Inequality**

Non-racialism has long occupied a central and symbolic position within South Africa's post-apartheid political imagination. It was articulated as both a moral rejection of apartheid's racial hierarchy and as a unifying principle intended to foster social cohesion in a deeply divided society. Despite its prominence in constitutional discourse and political rhetoric, recent scholarship increasingly treats non-racialism as an unsettled and contested ideal rather than an achieved condition (Maré, 2021). While the legal framework of post-apartheid South Africa explicitly prohibits racial discrimination and affirms equal citizenship, empirical evidence consistently shows that race continues to shape social and economic outcomes in profound ways. Seekings and Nattrass (2022) provide one of the most comprehensive accounts of this contradiction, arguing that South Africa has undergone racial deracialisation in law and political rights but not in its underlying economic structure. According to their analysis, the dismantling of apartheid legislation removed formal racial barriers to participation, yet left intact many of the material arrangements that distribute advantage unevenly across racial groups. Income distribution, access to wealth, employment opportunities, and patterns of spatial settlement remain strongly racialised, reflecting what they describe as the durability of advantage accumulated under colonialism and apartheid (Seekings & Nattrass, 2022). This argument challenges narratives that frame inequality primarily as a legacy problem that will resolve itself over time.

Quantitative data from Statistics South Africa reinforces this assessment. Recent labour market and household surveys indicate that Black South Africans continue to experience disproportionately high levels of unemployment, poverty, and income insecurity relative to White South Africans (Statistics South Africa, 2023). These disparities persist despite significant expansion in access to education since 1994, suggesting that educational attainment alone is insufficient to overcome structural barriers in the labour market. Statistics South Africa (2023) further shows that even when controlling for levels of education, Black graduates face higher unemployment rates than their White counterparts, pointing to the



continued operation of labour market segmentation and discrimination. Spatial inequality remains another critical dimension through which racialised disadvantage is reproduced. Turok and Scheba (2022) argue that apartheid-era spatial planning continues to shape access to economic opportunity, public services, and mobility in post-apartheid cities. Townships and informal settlements, which are overwhelmingly populated by Black South Africans, remain physically distant from centres of employment and economic activity. High transport costs, long commuting times, and limited access to quality infrastructure reinforce patterns of exclusion that are both spatial and racial in character (Turok & Scheba, 2022). These spatial arrangements constrain social mobility and entrench inequality across generations.

Land reform represents one of the most visible and politically charged indicators of unfulfilled non-racial transformation. Land dispossession was central to colonial conquest and apartheid governance, making land redistribution a powerful symbol of restorative justice in the democratic era. Hall and Cousins (2023) argue that the slow pace and fragmented implementation of land reform have undermined public confidence in the post-apartheid settlement, particularly among rural communities. Although land reform policies are well established in principle, their implementation has been hampered by bureaucratic weakness, limited state capacity, elite capture, and competing policy objectives (Hall & Cousins, 2023). As a result, patterns of land ownership remain heavily skewed along racial lines, reinforcing perceptions that economic power has remained largely untouched. Beyond material outcomes, scholars have also interrogated the ideological tensions embedded within the concept of non-racialism itself. Maré (2021) suggests that non-racialism has often been interpreted through a colour-blind lens, where the emphasis on not seeing race obscures the structural conditions that continue to produce racial inequality. This interpretation, while appealing as a moral stance, risks depoliticising race by treating it as a matter of individual prejudice rather than systemic power. Maré (2021) argues that such an approach may inadvertently protect existing hierarchies by discouraging race-conscious interventions aimed at redistribution.

This critique resonates with broader international debates on liberal equality and post-racialism, where formal inclusion and anti-discrimination laws coexist with enduring racial disparities (Seekings & Nattrass, 2022). In these debates, colour-blind approaches are increasingly viewed as insufficient in contexts marked by deep historical injustice. The South African case illustrates how the refusal to engage explicitly with race as a structural category

can limit the transformative potential of non-racialism. The researchers support this critical reading and argue that non-racialism in South Africa has, over time, been depoliticised and increasingly detached from questions of material redistribution. While the moral language of non-racialism remains powerful, its practical application has often prioritised social harmony over structural change. This has created a situation in which non-racialism is celebrated symbolically while economic power and asset ownership remain largely undisturbed. Without deliberate intervention in patterns of ownership, access to capital, and spatial development, non-racialism risks functioning as an ethical ideal rather than a transformative project. The literature further suggests that the gap between the promise of non-racialism and the persistence of racialised inequality contributes to growing frustration in public discourse. Racial tensions and polarised debates around transformation policies reflect not simply ideological disagreement, but material grievances rooted in lived experience (Hall & Cousins, 2023). For many South Africans, non-racialism has not delivered tangible improvements in daily life, leading to scepticism about its relevance and sincerity.

Taken together, the scholarship indicates that non-racialism remains a necessary but insufficient condition for social justice in post-apartheid South Africa. Legal equality and symbolic inclusion have not dismantled the structural foundations of racial inequality. The persistence of racialised poverty, spatial exclusion, and unequal asset ownership suggests that non-racialism must be reconnected to economic transformation if it is to retain legitimacy. Without such a reconnection, non-racialism risks becoming an abstract moral commitment divorced from the material realities it was meant to transform.

### **Non-Sexism, Gender Equality, and Structural Patriarchy**

The literature on non-sexism in South Africa presents a deeply paradoxical and often uncomfortable picture. On the one hand, the country is frequently celebrated for its formal commitments to gender equality and for the visibility of women within political institutions. On the other hand, the everyday realities experienced by the majority of women suggest that structural patriarchy remains deeply entrenched. This tension between formal progress and lived inequality is a recurring theme in contemporary scholarship and is central to understanding why the constitutional ideal of non-sexism remains only partially realised. South Africa is regularly cited as one of the leading countries globally in terms of women's political representation, particularly in Parliament and the executive. Hassim, Gouws, and Mkhize (2021) note that women have consistently constituted over 40 per cent of Members of

Parliament, placing South Africa among the top-ranked countries worldwide for descriptive representation. This achievement is widely attributed to the strength of women's movements during the anti-apartheid struggle and the deliberate incorporation of gender equality into the post-1994 constitutional and policy framework. Gouws (2022) further argues that feminist activism played a decisive role in shaping progressive legislation on reproductive rights, domestic violence, workplace discrimination, and equality before the law.

Despite these significant institutional and legal gains, the literature is clear that descriptive representation has not translated into substantive gender equality. Hassim et al. (2021) emphasise that the presence of women in political office has not fundamentally altered gendered power relations within society or the economy, particularly for poor and working-class women. This gap between representation and transformation highlights the limits of focusing on numerical inclusion without addressing deeper structural constraints. The persistence of male-dominated economic power, combined with entrenched social norms, continues to shape women's vulnerability in ways that formal political equality alone cannot resolve. Gender-based violence represents one of the starkest indicators of the failure to achieve non-sexism in practice. Statistics South Africa (2022) reports consistently high levels of violence against women, including intimate partner violence and femicide, placing South Africa among countries with the highest recorded rates globally. These patterns are not episodic but systemic, reflecting what scholars describe as a crisis of social relations rather than isolated criminal behaviour. Jewkes and Abrahams (2023) argue that gender-based violence in South Africa is rooted in enduring patriarchal norms that normalise male dominance, control, and entitlement, particularly in contexts of economic insecurity and social stress.

The literature also highlights the weakness of institutional responses to gender-based violence as a critical factor undermining non-sexism. While South Africa has an extensive legal framework addressing violence against women, implementation remains uneven and often ineffective. Jewkes and Abrahams (2023) note persistent failures in policing, prosecution, and victim support services, which contribute to low reporting rates and high levels of impunity. These institutional shortcomings reinforce women's mistrust of the state and deepen the gap between constitutional promises and lived realities. Economic exclusion further undermines the realisation of non-sexism. Budlender (2022) demonstrates that women in South Africa continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, including childcare,

elder care, and household labour. This unequal distribution of care responsibilities significantly limits women's participation in formal employment and contributes to persistent income and wealth inequalities. Even where women are employed, they are more likely to be concentrated in low-paid, insecure, and informal work, reinforcing patterns of economic vulnerability. Budlender (2022) argues that unpaid care work remains largely invisible in economic policy, despite its central role in sustaining households and the broader economy.

These economic inequalities are particularly pronounced for Black women and those living in rural areas or informal settlements. Limited access to affordable childcare, safe transport, and basic services intensifies the constraints faced by women seeking paid employment. The intersection of gender with race and class thus produces layered forms of disadvantage that cannot be understood through a singular focus on gender alone. This intersectional dimension is increasingly emphasised in recent scholarship as essential to any meaningful analysis of non-sexism in the South African context. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and exacerbated existing gender inequalities. Casale and Shepherd (2021) show that women experienced disproportionate job losses during lockdown periods, particularly in sectors such as domestic work, hospitality, and retail. Women's income recovery following the pandemic has also been slower than that of men, reflecting structural vulnerabilities rather than temporary disruptions. The pandemic underscored the fragility of women's economic participation and highlighted the absence of robust social protection mechanisms that adequately account for gendered risk.

Feminist scholars have also critically interrogated the state's approach to gender equality, particularly the reliance on technocratic policy instruments. Gouws (2022) argues that gender mainstreaming in South Africa has often been reduced to bureaucratic checklists and compliance exercises, rather than serving as a transformative tool aimed at dismantling patriarchal power relations. This tendency mirrors broader critiques of post-apartheid governance, where sophisticated policy frameworks coexist with weak implementation capacity and limited political will. As a result, gender equality is frequently treated as an administrative obligation rather than a fundamental social and economic project. The persistence of structural patriarchy also reflects deeper cultural and ideological dynamics. Patriarchal norms continue to shape expectations around masculinity, authority, and gender roles, particularly in contexts of unemployment and social marginalisation. Jewkes and Abrahams (2023) note that economic exclusion can intensify violent expressions of

masculinity, as men seek to assert control in environments where traditional markers of status and identity are undermined. This insight reinforces the argument that non-sexism cannot be achieved in isolation from broader socio-economic transformation. The researchers align with this body of literature but emphasises the need to read gender inequality through an explicitly intersectional lens. Non-sexism, like non-racism, remains constrained by racialised poverty, spatial marginalisation, and enduring class inequalities. The continued vulnerability of Black women in particular illustrates how gender reforms that do not confront economic power and social structure risk reproducing existing hierarchies. Without addressing the material conditions that shape women's lives, formal equality measures remain insufficient.

Overall, the literature suggests that South Africa's commitment to non-sexism is strongest at the level of law and representation, but weakest in the realm of lived experience. Structural patriarchy persists not because of the absence of policy, but because of the limited capacity and willingness to transform the social and economic foundations of inequality. Non-sexism, in this sense, remains an unfinished project, constrained by broader governance failures and deep-rooted socio-economic injustice.

### **Intersections of Democracy, Race, and Gender**

A growing, though still comparatively limited, body of scholarship argues that South Africa's democratic challenges cannot be adequately understood through isolated analyses of political institutions, racial inequality, or gender relations. Instead, recent literature increasingly calls for integrated frameworks that recognise how democracy, race, and gender intersect in shaping lived citizenship. Booysen (2021) contends that South Africa's contemporary protest politics are a critical lens through which these intersections become visible, as protests often articulate layered grievances that combine economic exclusion, racialised inequality, and gendered vulnerability. These protests are not merely reactions to service delivery failures but expressions of deeper frustration with exclusion from the substantive benefits of democracy. Empirical studies of community protests support this interpretation by showing that protest participation is frequently driven by experiences of dignity denial and perceived disrespect by state institutions. Booysen (2021) argues that demands voiced during protests often extend beyond material claims to include recognition, voice, and inclusion, highlighting the moral dimensions of democratic dissatisfaction. This framing is significant because it demonstrates how democratic discontent is rooted not only in policy outcomes but also in the everyday experience of marginalisation. Race and gender shape these experiences profoundly, as

historically disadvantaged groups remain more likely to encounter the state as unresponsive or punitive rather than supportive.

Mbembe (2023) situates South Africa's democratic malaise within a broader crisis of postcolonial citizenship, where formal political inclusion coexists with structural abandonment. From this perspective, the promise of democratic citizenship is undermined by the persistence of socio-economic arrangements that systematically exclude large segments of the population from meaningful participation. Mbembe (2023) argues that for many citizens, particularly Black women and youth in poor communities, the state is most visible through its failures, whether in policing, housing, healthcare, or employment creation. This uneven experience of democracy reinforces feelings of dispossession and erodes trust in democratic institutions. The intersectional nature of exclusion becomes particularly evident when considering how race and gender mediate access to democratic voice. Mattes (2022) shows that political efficacy and trust in democratic institutions are significantly lower among young, poor, and predominantly Black South Africans, reflecting a sense that participation yields limited returns. Women in marginalised communities face additional barriers, including time poverty, safety concerns, and economic precarity, which constrain their ability to engage in formal political processes. These findings suggest that democracy operates unevenly across social groups, producing differentiated forms of citizenship that are deeply shaped by race and gender.

Scholars have also highlighted how democratic institutions themselves can reproduce inequality when they fail to address structural disadvantage. Seekings and Natrass (2022) argue that South Africa's political system has been more effective at extending formal rights than at transforming the underlying distribution of economic power. This limitation has direct implications for both non-racialism and non-sexism, as economic exclusion remains strongly racialised and gendered. When democratic governance does not disrupt these patterns, constitutional ideals risk becoming disconnected from social reality. The literature on gender further reinforces the need for integrated analysis. Gouws (2022) notes that women's political inclusion has not substantially altered policy priorities in ways that address the intersection of race, class, and gender. Poor Black women remain disproportionately affected by unemployment, violence, and inadequate public services, despite progressive legal frameworks. This disconnect highlights how democratic representation alone cannot

compensate for structural inequality, particularly when economic policy remains largely insulated from participatory influence.

The researchers build on this emerging scholarship by arguing that non-racialism, non-sexism, and democracy should be understood as mutually reinforcing or mutually undermining processes rather than separate normative goals. When democracy fails to deliver material justice and social inclusion, commitments to non-racialism and non-sexism lose credibility among those most affected by inequality. In such contexts, constitutional ideals may be perceived as symbolic gestures rather than lived realities, deepening cynicism and disengagement. This dynamic is evident in declining voter turnout and rising protest participation, which reflect alternative forms of political expression in the face of perceived institutional closure. Conversely, persistent racial and gender inequality actively erode democratic legitimacy by excluding large segments of the population from meaningful participation. Scholars argue that democracy depends not only on formal procedures but also on a shared belief that political inclusion can produce substantive change. Southall (2021) warns that when inequality becomes normalised, democracy risks hollowing out, as citizens withdraw from formal politics or engage through disruptive means. This erosion of legitimacy is particularly acute in societies marked by extreme inequality, where democratic promises remain unmet for the majority.

Recent work on social cohesion further underscores these concerns. Turok and Scheba (2022) argue that spatial inequality continues to fragment South African society along racial and class lines, limiting opportunities for collective democratic engagement. Segregated living conditions reinforce unequal access to resources, information, and networks, which in turn shape political participation. Gender intersects with these spatial dynamics, as women in marginalised areas face heightened exposure to violence and insecurity, further constraining civic engagement. Overall, the literature suggests that South Africa's democratic challenges are best understood through an intersectional lens that recognises the entanglement of political, racial, and gendered forms of exclusion. Democracy that does not confront racialised poverty and structural patriarchy risks reproducing the very inequalities it claims to transcend. The persistence of protest politics, declining trust, and uneven citizenship signals not the rejection of democracy as an ideal, but frustration with its incomplete realisation. Addressing this crisis requires reimagining democracy as a substantive project grounded in social justice, rather than a purely procedural achievement.



### **Conclusion of the Literature Review**

The contemporary literature overwhelmingly suggests that South Africa's post-1994 project remains unfinished. While democratic institutions endure, their legitimacy is weakened by inequality, corruption, and exclusion. Non-racialism and non-sexism, though constitutionally enshrined, remain largely unrealised in material terms. The researchers supports this critical consensus but advances a relational reading that treats democracy, race, and gender as interdependent rather than discrete domains. The literature reveals that South Africa's challenge is not the absence of progressive ideals but the failure to translate them into lived equality. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond procedural reform toward structural transformation that confronts economic power, patriarchal norms, and historical injustice simultaneously. Without such an integrated approach, the vision of 1994 risks remaining a moral reference point rather than a lived reality.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is anchored in Democratic Consolidation Theory and Critical Political Economy as complementary lenses for understanding South Africa's post-1994 transformation. The use of these frameworks reflects the view that democracy cannot be adequately assessed through institutional design alone, nor can socio-economic inequality be understood without reference to political power and governance structures (Diamond, Linz, & Lipset, 2021). Together, these perspectives enable a more holistic analysis of whether the ideals of a non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic South Africa have been substantively realised.

Democratic Consolidation Theory is concerned with the conditions under which democracy becomes stable, legitimate, and broadly accepted as the only viable system of governance (Diamond et al., 2021). In recent scholarship, consolidation is understood as extending well beyond the regular holding of elections. It encompasses the extent to which democratic institutions are trusted, laws are applied equally, civil liberties are protected, and citizens experience meaningful inclusion in political and social life (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2023). From this perspective, democracy is weakened when large segments of the population experience persistent exclusion, insecurity, or disillusionment, even if formal democratic procedures remain intact. Applied to the South African context, Democratic Consolidation Theory draws attention to the tension between constitutional achievement and democratic practice. Although South Africa has maintained competitive elections, an independent judiciary, and a robust constitutional framework, declining voter turnout and eroding trust in political

institutions raise concerns about the depth of democratic consolidation (Mattes, 2022). The theory is particularly useful in highlighting how socio-economic inequality, corruption, and weak accountability mechanisms can undermine democratic legitimacy over time, especially in highly unequal societies (Southall, 2021). The researchers adopt this perspective to argue that democracy in South Africa remains procedurally resilient but substantively fragile.

Critical Political Economy provides a necessary counterbalance by foregrounding the role of economic power, historical legacies, and structural inequality in shaping political outcomes. This approach challenges liberal democratic assumptions that political rights alone are sufficient to produce equality and inclusion (Bond & Malikane, 2023). Instead, it emphasises how colonialism and apartheid entrenched patterns of ownership, labour exploitation, and spatial inequality that continue to shape post-apartheid society (Seekings & Nattrass, 2022). From this viewpoint, democracy operates within, and is constrained by, a broader political economy that privileges certain social groups while marginalising others. Scholars working within a critical political economy tradition argue that South Africa's post-1994 settlement prioritised political inclusion while leaving core economic structures largely intact (Bond & Malikane, 2023). This has resulted in what some describe as political emancipation without economic liberation, where formal equality coexists with deep material inequality. The persistence of racialised poverty, gendered labour market exclusion, and unequal access to land and wealth are therefore not seen as policy failures alone, but as outcomes of structural continuity (Hall & Cousins, 2023). The researchers support this interpretation and contends that without addressing economic concentration and patterns of accumulation, non-racialism and non-sexism remain limited in their transformative capacity.

When combined, Democratic Consolidation Theory and Critical Political Economy allow for an integrated analysis that links political form to socio-economic substance. Democratic institutions cannot consolidate in a context where economic inequality systematically excludes the majority from meaningful participation, while economic transformation is unlikely to be sustainable without accountable and legitimate democratic governance (Southall, 2021). The researchers therefore adopt these frameworks to examine how democracy, race, and gender intersect within South Africa's broader political economy, rather than treating them as separate analytical domains.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis research design, which is particularly suitable for examining normative frameworks, policy commitments, and structural trends within a democratic context (Bowen, 2020). Document analysis enables the systematic interrogation of existing texts to identify patterns, themes, and contradictions relevant to the research question. The approach is appropriate for this study given its focus on assessing democratic ideals against observable social and institutional outcomes.

Data were drawn exclusively from publicly available and verifiable sources. These included the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, government policy documents and reports, official statistics published by Statistics South Africa, Afrobarometer survey data, reports of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, and peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2024 (Statistics South Africa, 2023; Zondo Commission, 2022; Mattes, 2022). The reliance on recent sources ensures that the analysis reflects contemporary dynamics rather than historical assumptions.

The use of secondary data and publicly accessible documents means that the study does not involve human participants, interviews, or personal identifiers. As a result, the research does not require ethical clearance, in line with standard academic practice for document-based studies (Bowen, 2020). This methodological choice also enhances transparency and replicability, as all sources used are accessible to other researchers.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, focusing on indicators related to democratic performance, non-racialism, and non-sexism. Themes such as institutional trust, inequality, participation, gendered outcomes, and socio-economic exclusion were identified across multiple sources and compared to identify convergence and divergence (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Triangulation across different types of documents and datasets was used to strengthen analytical rigour and reduce the risk of single-source bias.

Through this methodological approach, the study seeks to provide a credible and theoretically grounded assessment of whether South Africa has moved closer to the democratic vision articulated in 1994, or whether structural and institutional constraints continue to limit transformative outcomes.

## RESULTS

The findings of this study point to a pattern of uneven, contradictory, and often fragile progress in South Africa's pursuit of a non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic society. While constitutional and institutional foundations remain largely intact, the lived realities of many citizens reveal persistent inequalities, declining trust, and structural barriers that continue to undermine the transformative aspirations articulated in 1994 (Southall, 2021). The results are therefore presented across three interrelated dimensions: democratic performance, non-racialism, and non-sexism, with particular attention to how these dimensions intersect in practice rather than operate independently.

### **Democratic Performance and Institutional Functioning**

At an institutional level, South Africa continues to meet the minimum criteria of a constitutional democracy. Regular national, provincial, and local government elections are held, political competition remains legally protected, and the judiciary has repeatedly demonstrated its independence through rulings that constrain executive overreach and protect constitutional rights (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2023). The Constitutional Court, in particular, remains a central pillar of democratic accountability, reinforcing the rule of law even in politically sensitive cases (Venter & Landsberg, 2023). Despite these institutional strengths, the results indicate a significant decline in democratic participation and public confidence. Voter turnout has steadily decreased since the first democratic election in 1994, with the 2021 local government elections recording the lowest turnout in the democratic era (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2023). This decline is especially pronounced among young voters, many of whom express deep scepticism about the capacity of electoral politics to improve their socio-economic conditions (Mattes, 2022). Afrobarometer data confirm that while South Africans continue to support democracy in principle, satisfaction with how democracy functions in practice has fallen sharply over the past decade (Mattes, 2022). Perceptions of corruption and political misconduct further erode democratic legitimacy. The findings of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture documented systematic abuse of public institutions, extensive patronage networks, and the erosion of administrative capacity across key state-owned enterprises and government departments (Zondo Commission, 2022). These revelations have reinforced public perceptions that political elites prioritise personal and factional interests over public service, weakening trust in representative institutions (Chipkin & Swilling, 2022). The consequences of state capture extend beyond corruption itself. Scholars note that weakened state capacity has compromised service delivery,

exacerbated inequality, and deepened social frustration, particularly in historically marginalised communities (Southall, 2021). Protest data indicate a sustained increase in community-level unrest, often linked to failures in local governance, housing provision, water access, and electricity supply (Booyesen, 2021). These protests, while sometimes framed as signs of democratic vibrancy, also reflect a breakdown in formal channels of participation and accountability. Taken together, the results suggest that South Africa's democracy is procedurally resilient but substantively strained. Institutions continue to function, yet their capacity to deliver responsive, ethical, and inclusive governance remains uneven. This tension between constitutional form and democratic substance is a central feature of the post-1994 political landscape (Southall, 2021).

### **Non-Racialism and Persistent Racialised Inequality**

In relation to non-racialism, the findings reveal a stark contrast between legal equality and material outcomes. Racial discrimination is formally prohibited, and political rights are universally extended; however, socio-economic inequality remains profoundly racialised (Seekings & Nattrass, 2022). Statistical evidence consistently shows that Black South Africans remain disproportionately affected by poverty, unemployment, and insecure livelihoods, while White South Africans continue to hold a disproportionate share of wealth and economic assets (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Unemployment remains one of the most visible indicators of racialised inequality. According to Statistics South Africa (2023), the unemployment rate among Black Africans is more than four times higher than that of White South Africans. Youth unemployment is particularly severe, with Black youth facing structural barriers linked to poor-quality schooling, spatial marginalisation, and limited access to networks and capital (Statistics South Africa, 2023). These outcomes suggest that labour market outcomes remain deeply shaped by apartheid-era inequalities, despite three decades of democratic governance. Income and wealth disparities further reinforce racial inequality. While a Black middle class has expanded since 1994, wealth ownership remains highly concentrated, with intergenerational transfers of property, land, and financial assets continuing to favour historically advantaged groups (Seekings & Nattrass, 2022). The Gini coefficient remains among the highest globally, underscoring the limited redistributive impact of post-apartheid economic policy (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Spatial inequality remains another critical dimension of racialised disadvantage. Apartheid-era urban planning continues to shape access to employment, transport, education, and healthcare, with many Black South Africans residing far from economic centres (Turok & Scheba, 2022). Informal

settlements and under-resourced townships remain sites of concentrated poverty and infrastructural neglect, reinforcing patterns of exclusion that undermine the promise of non-racial citizenship. Land ownership remains a particularly symbolic and material indicator of unfinished transformation. Despite policy commitments to land redistribution and restitution, progress has been slow and uneven, leading to widespread frustration and contestation (Hall & Cousins, 2023). The continued racial skew in land ownership not only reflects economic inequality but also represents an unresolved historical injustice that shapes perceptions of the democratic settlement. These findings support scholarly arguments that South Africa has achieved formal non-racialism without substantive racial equality. The persistence of racialised socio-economic outcomes suggests that non-racialism has been institutionalised at the level of law but not fully realised in lived experience (Maré, 2021). This disjuncture contributes to renewed racial tension and challenges the legitimacy of the post-apartheid social contract.

### **Non-Sexism, Gender Representation, and Lived Inequality**

The results relating to non-sexism reveal a similarly complex and contradictory picture. On one hand, South Africa has made notable gains in women's political representation. Women constitute a significant proportion of Members of Parliament and Cabinet, reflecting deliberate party-level commitments to gender inclusion (Hassim, Gouws, & Mkhize, 2021). Legislative frameworks addressing gender equality, reproductive rights, and workplace discrimination are widely regarded as progressive by international standards (Gouws, 2022). However, these formal gains coexist with persistent and pervasive gendered inequality. South Africa records some of the highest rates of gender-based violence globally, with women facing high levels of physical, sexual, and economic abuse across social contexts (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Gender-based violence is widely recognised as both a human rights crisis and a structural barrier to women's full participation in social, economic, and political life (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2023). Economic participation remains deeply unequal along gender lines. Women are overrepresented in informal, part-time, and precarious employment, often without access to social protection or job security (Budlender, 2022). Wage gaps persist across sectors, and women are less likely to occupy senior management positions, particularly in the private sector (Hassim et al., 2021). These inequalities are further intensified for Black women, who face intersecting forms of racial and gender discrimination in the labour market (Casale & Shepherd, 2021). Unpaid care work constitutes a major structural constraint on gender equality. Time-use data show that women spend significantly more time on domestic

labour and caregiving than men, limiting their opportunities for paid employment and political engagement (Budlender, 2022). This burden is especially pronounced in low-income households and rural areas, where access to childcare services, healthcare, and basic infrastructure is limited. The findings also highlight weaknesses in institutional responses to gender inequality. Despite policy commitments and dedicated structures, implementation remains uneven, and accountability mechanisms are often weak (Gouws, 2022). Survivors of gender-based violence frequently encounter barriers within the criminal justice system, including underreporting, slow case processing, and low conviction rates, which further erode trust in state institutions (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2023). Overall, the results suggest that non-sexism has been more successful as a legal and representational project than as a lived social reality. While women's presence in political institutions is significant, this has not translated into broad-based gender justice, particularly for poor and working-class women. This gap mirrors broader patterns observed in non-racialism and democracy, where formal inclusion coexists with structural exclusion.

### **Intersections and Cumulative Effects**

A key result emerging from the analysis is the cumulative and intersecting nature of democratic, racial, and gender inequalities. The persistence of racialised poverty undermines democratic participation by limiting access to education, information, and economic security, which are essential for meaningful citizenship (Southall, 2021). Similarly, gender inequality restricts women's capacity to engage fully in democratic processes, reinforcing patterns of exclusion and marginalisation (Hassim et al., 2021). These intersecting inequalities contribute to growing disillusionment with the democratic project, particularly among young people and marginalised communities (Mattes, 2022). The findings suggest that when democracy fails to deliver material improvement and personal security, its normative appeal weakens, even when constitutional protections remain in place. In summary, the results demonstrate that South Africa's progress toward a non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic society has been partial and uneven. While institutional foundations endure, substantive transformation remains constrained by structural inequality, governance failures, and weak implementation. These findings underscore the need to assess democratic achievement not only through institutional survival but through lived equality and social justice.



## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study point to a central paradox in South Africa's post-1994 trajectory. On the one hand, the country has succeeded in entrenching procedural democracy through a stable constitutional framework, regular elections, and a judiciary that continues to assert its independence. On the other hand, the substantive content of democracy, understood as lived equality, social justice, and meaningful participation, remains deeply constrained. This disjuncture between democratic form and democratic substance is critical for understanding why the ideals of a non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic South Africa continue to feel unrealised for large segments of the population (Southall, 2021; Mattes, 2022). Procedural democracy, as reflected in electoral continuity and constitutional compliance, has often been cited as evidence of democratic success in South Africa. However, democratic theory increasingly cautions against equating institutional survival with democratic consolidation. Diamond, Linz, and Lipset (2021) emphasise that democracy becomes vulnerable when citizens experience persistent exclusion, insecurity, and inequality, even in the presence of formal democratic institutions. The results of this study support this position by demonstrating that South Africa's democratic challenge is not the collapse of institutions, but the erosion of their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens whose material conditions remain precarious (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2023).

The persistence of racialised inequality is central to this erosion of legitimacy. Despite the constitutional commitment to non-racialism, socio-economic outcomes remain sharply differentiated along racial lines. The continued overrepresentation of Black South Africans among the poor and unemployed reflects structural patterns rooted in colonial dispossession and apartheid-era labour regimes that were not fundamentally dismantled during the transition (Seekings & Nattrass, 2022). The researchers argues that non-racialism, when detached from economic restructuring, risks becoming a moral discourse rather than a material reality. This interpretation is consistent with Maré (2021), who warns that colour-blind approaches to equality may obscure rather than confront structural injustice. The endurance of racialised inequality has significant implications for democratic participation. Political equality presupposes a minimum level of social and economic security that enables citizens to engage meaningfully in public life. Where poverty, unemployment, and spatial marginalisation dominate daily experience, democratic participation is often reduced to episodic voting or protest rather than sustained civic engagement (Booyesen, 2021). The findings suggest that declining voter turnout and rising protest activity are not contradictory

phenomena, but parallel expressions of frustration with a democratic system perceived as unresponsive to material need (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2023).

Gender inequality further complicates claims of democratic and social transformation. While South Africa's achievements in women's political representation are significant, the persistence of gender-based violence and economic exclusion undermines the substance of non-sexism. Feminist scholars argue that representation alone cannot dismantle patriarchal power relations embedded in social norms, economic structures, and institutional practices (Hassim, Gouws, & Mkhize, 2021). The findings of this study reinforce this argument by showing that women's formal inclusion in political institutions has not translated into safety, economic security, or equality for the majority of women. Gender-based violence, in particular, poses a direct challenge to democratic ideals. Violence restricts women's freedom of movement, political participation, and economic opportunity, thereby limiting their ability to exercise citizenship on equal terms (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2023). The researchers interpret the persistence of high levels of violence not as a failure of law alone, but as evidence of deeper social and economic stressors, including unemployment, inequality, and fragile social cohesion. In this sense, gender-based violence must be understood as both a gender justice issue and a democratic crisis.

The intersection of race, gender, and class further deepens democratic exclusion. Black women, especially those in rural areas and informal settlements, experience overlapping forms of disadvantage that are insufficiently addressed by single-issue policy approaches (Casale & Shepherd, 2021). The findings suggest that non-racialism and non-sexism cannot be pursued in isolation, as progress in one domain is undermined by stagnation in others. This supports calls in the literature for intersectional approaches to democratic analysis that recognise how multiple forms of inequality reinforce one another (Gouws, 2022). Governance failures intensify these structural constraints. The revelations of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture exposed how corruption and patronage weakened state capacity and diverted resources away from public service delivery (Zondo Commission, 2022). The researchers concur with Chipkin and Swilling (2022), who argue that state capture represented a systemic reconfiguration of power rather than isolated misconduct. This erosion of institutional capacity has had tangible consequences for infrastructure, social services, and economic opportunity, particularly in already marginalised communities.

The interaction between governance failure and structural inequality is especially damaging for democratic legitimacy. When the state is perceived as both incapable and corrupt, citizens are less likely to trust democratic institutions or believe in the fairness of the political system (Mattes, 2022). Afrobarometer data show that declining trust is not driven by rejection of democracy as a principle, but by dissatisfaction with how democracy is experienced in practice (Mattes, 2022). This distinction is crucial, as it suggests that democratic renewal remains possible if substantive conditions improve. The findings align closely with Southall, Mattes, and Graham (2021), who argue that democratic erosion often begins with socio-economic exclusion rather than abrupt institutional collapse. In South Africa, the gradual hollowing out of democratic substance has occurred alongside the preservation of democratic form. Formal equality before the law coexists with deep material inequality, producing what some scholars describe as a democracy of rights without redistribution (Seekings & Nattrass, 2022). The researchers support this interpretation and extend it by emphasising the cumulative effects of exclusion across race, gender, and class.

Importantly, the South African case challenges overly linear models of democratic consolidation. Rather than moving steadily from transition to consolidation, South Africa appears to have entered a prolonged phase of democratic tension, where gains coexist with reversals. This condition is not unique to South Africa but reflects broader global trends in unequal democracies, where economic concentration undermines political equality (Diamond et al., 2021). However, South Africa's extreme inequality and historical legacy of racial domination intensify these dynamics. The discussion also raises questions about the role of the post-1994 political settlement. Several scholars argue that the negotiated transition prioritised political stability and elite compromise at the expense of deeper socio-economic transformation (Bond & Malikané, 2023). While this settlement succeeded in avoiding civil conflict and securing democratic institutions, it left intact many of the economic structures that reproduce inequality. The researchers view this as a foundational tension that continues to shape contemporary outcomes, particularly in relation to land, wealth, and labour markets. Equally, the findings caution against narratives of democratic failure. South Africa's constitutional institutions, civil society, and independent media continue to provide important checks on power and spaces for contestation (Venter & Landsberg, 2023). Social movements, community protests, and advocacy organisations demonstrate that democratic engagement persists, even if it increasingly occurs outside formal political channels (Booyesen, 2021). These dynamics suggest that democracy in South Africa is strained but not extinguished. In

interpreting these results, the researchers advance a relational understanding of democratic achievement. Democracy, non-racialism, and non-sexism are not separate goals to be achieved sequentially, but interdependent conditions that rise or fall together. Persistent inequality undermines democratic participation, while weak democracy limits the state's capacity to address inequality. This circular relationship helps explain why progress has been uneven despite strong constitutional foundations.

In summary, the discussion underscores that South Africa's post-1994 project remains incomplete. The country has achieved procedural democracy but continues to struggle with substantive transformation. The endurance of racialised inequality and gendered injustice is not accidental, but the outcome of historical legacies interacting with contemporary governance failures. These findings reaffirm the argument that democratic legitimacy depends not only on institutions and rights, but on the extent to which citizens experience dignity, security, and inclusion in their everyday lives. Without addressing these underlying conditions, the ideals envisioned in 1994 will remain aspirational rather than fully realised.

## CONCLUSION

This article set out to assess the extent to which South Africa has realised the non-sexist, non-racial, and democratic society envisioned at the dawn of democracy in 1994. The analysis demonstrates that while the country has made undeniable progress in establishing robust democratic institutions and a rights-based constitutional order, these achievements have not translated consistently into substantive equality or shared lived dignity. South Africa's democratic project, therefore, cannot be described as a failure, but it remains fundamentally incomplete. One of the most significant achievements of the post-1994 period has been the durability of constitutional democracy. The regularity of elections, the continued independence of the judiciary, and the survival of constitutional norms during periods of political turbulence point to a political system that is institutionally resilient. These foundations matter. They provide the legal and moral framework within which contestation, reform, and accountability remain possible. Without them, the prospects for democratic renewal would be far bleaker. However, institutions alone do not constitute democracy in its fullest sense.

The central conclusion emerging from this study is that the promise of democracy has been unevenly realised across social groups and lived spaces. For many citizens, especially those located at the intersection of race, gender, and class disadvantage, democracy has remained

abstract rather than experiential. Formal political rights coexist with material deprivation, insecurity, and social marginalisation. This coexistence has weakened the credibility of non-racialism and non-sexism as lived social realities, even as they remain firmly embedded in constitutional language and public discourse. Non-racialism, in particular, has proven difficult to translate from principle into practice. While overt racial exclusion is no longer sanctioned by law, deep structural inequalities continue to mirror apartheid-era patterns. Access to quality education, secure employment, land, and wealth remains unevenly distributed, with race still serving as a strong predictor of life chances. This persistence does not imply a return to racial authoritarianism, but it does suggest that political inclusion has not been matched by economic transformation at the scale initially anticipated. As a result, non-racialism risks being perceived as symbolic rather than transformative.

Similarly, the constitutional commitment to non-sexism has not been fully realised in everyday life. Women's political representation and formal legal protections stand in sharp contrast to the pervasive realities of gender-based violence, economic precarity, and unequal care burdens. The findings underscore that legal equality does not automatically dismantle entrenched social norms or power relations. Where violence and insecurity shape women's daily experiences, the exercise of citizenship is constrained, and democracy itself is diminished. Non-sexism, therefore, cannot be measured solely by representation or policy intent, but by safety, autonomy, and economic opportunity. The study also highlights how socio-economic inequality undermines democratic legitimacy. Democracy relies not only on the right to vote, but on citizens' belief that political participation can meaningfully improve their lives. Persistent poverty, unemployment, and service delivery failures have weakened this belief for many South Africans. Declining electoral participation, growing protest activity, and widespread political disillusionment should be understood as symptoms of exclusion rather than apathy. Citizens are not disengaging from democracy as an ideal; they are responding to a democratic system that has not consistently delivered substantive inclusion.

Importantly, the endurance of inequality and exclusion cannot be attributed solely to contemporary governance failures. These outcomes reflect the interaction between historical legacies and post-transition choices. The negotiated nature of the democratic transition prioritised political stability and reconciliation, sometimes at the expense of deeper economic restructuring. While this compromise avoided violent conflict and enabled institutional

continuity, it also limited the extent to which inherited economic structures were transformed. The consequences of this settlement continue to shape democratic outcomes decades later.

Nevertheless, this article cautions against narratives of democratic decline that overlook sources of resilience and agency. Civil society, independent media, social movements, and community activism continue to play a critical role in holding power to account and articulating alternative visions of justice. These forms of engagement indicate that democratic energy has not disappeared but has increasingly shifted outside formal political institutions. Such dynamics suggest that democracy in South Africa is contested and strained, but not exhausted. The conclusion, therefore, is not one of pessimism, but of realism. South Africa's democratic project remains a work in progress, marked by contradiction rather than closure. The ideals articulated in 1994 retain their normative power precisely because they have not been fully realised. They continue to serve as a standard against which current conditions are measured and contested. This unfinished quality should be understood as a call to renewal rather than resignation.

Future research would benefit from comparative analysis of other post-transition societies grappling with similar tensions between political inclusion and socio-economic exclusion. Such comparisons could yield valuable insights into how democratic ideals are sustained or eroded over time. Further inquiry is also needed into the role of ethical leadership, institutional integrity, and economic restructuring in rebuilding public trust. Equally important is research on civic renewal, particularly the ways in which communities and social movements reimagine participation beyond electoral politics. Ultimately, reclaiming the vision of 1994 requires more than constitutional fidelity or rhetorical commitment. It demands sustained political will to confront inequality, deliberate efforts to dismantle structural injustice, and governance practices grounded in accountability and ethical leadership. Democracy must be experienced not only in the ballot box or courtroom, but in schools, workplaces, communities, and homes. Until dignity, security, and opportunity are more evenly distributed, the promise of a non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic South Africa will remain aspirational. The task ahead is not to abandon that promise, but to complete it.

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