

**“WHO AM I?”-  
SOUTH AFRICAN INDIAN WOMEN MANAGERS’  
STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY:  
ESCAPING THE UBIQUITOUS CAGE**

**by**

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# DEDICATION

**This thesis is dedicated to my parents,  
Mohamed Hoosen and Farida Abdul Carrim Cassim Moti,  
who have supported, encouraged and challenged me  
to gain knowledge throughout my life and  
to dedicate my services to society.**



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how some Indian women in South Africa who became managers negotiated their identities in their early lives and in their adult working lives on their journeys to becoming successful managers.

Prior studies on identity work and the experience of intersectionality by ethnic minority women have typically focused on professional identities in isolation, separate from early life influences. The current study uses a life story approach to provide a holistic understanding of the journeys of the first significant cohort of Indian women to ascend to management positions in South Africa. I explored the narratives of 13 Indian women managers in senior and top management positions in corporate South Africa using a grounded theory approach to make visible the identity work they have engaged in throughout their lives so far.

The life stories of the participants reveal that throughout their lives they have grappled with negotiating a gender identity shaped by Indian cultural assumptions about the roles of men and women in juxtaposition to or in combination with their personal aspirations for professional success. I used a bird cage metaphor to capture how these multiple factors shaped and constrained their lives and careers. The interplay between their racio-ethnic, gender and professional identities is unpacked, and their strategies for reconciling the tensions among their multiple identities are described. In negotiating their identities, these women have developed a particular type of hybrid identity that allows them to move between the compartments into which their professional identity demands and cultural

expectations have been divided. The women's cultural identities remain pivotal in their lives, and they have strong collectivist identities, as they still live within their communities even after the official end of apartheid.

My findings enrich and extend the identity literature relating to ethnic minority women by focusing on identity negotiation over time, rather than only on discrete moments in time. My findings also contribute to identity literature in general, as they illustrate that an individual's identity is formed not only by personal and social identities, but also by the historical and cultural context beyond the organisation within which the person operates. This context is often not considered in identity research in organisations – most studies relating to identity work focus on the tensions between personal identities and professional identities in the workplace. It also reinforces the idea that identity is never fixed but always in negotiation.

**Key words:** identity work; intersectionality; hybrid identity; gender identity; racio-ethnic identity; professional identity; Indian women managers; grounded theory; Atlas.ti; bird cage metaphor.



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