

CHAPTER 6: STRUGGLING FOR IDENTITY IN THE CORPORATE CAGE

“In a male dominated environment like our company, it’s also difficult for them to include females. There are these difficulties, so you find not only are you reserved but from their side they are also reserved. It’s like this boulder in the way. But I think over the years it’s gotten better. It was a difficult thing for me to get through and chisel away at the boulder.”

(Shamila)

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter dealt with the childhood socialization of the women who participated in the study. The focus was on the socio-historical context within which the women were raised. Apartheid, Indian culture and the family played a central role in the women’s childhood socialization and identity formation. Their fathers’ support for higher education, agency and resilience were the core aspects that led the women to resist the restrictions imposed on them by prescribed gender roles in Indian culture and society.

The first step into the external world was their entry into university. However, entry into university did not free the women from the restrictions that existed in childhood. The women’s lives changed minimally, except that at university the institutions were larger. They were exposed to different races, various ideologies which were unlike the predominantly Indian high schools they had attended. Moreover, in the university environment, the majority of the women focused on their studies and did not have the confidence to enter into leadership positions or get involved in social groups on campus. Fellow Indian students coerced the women not to form relationships with white students and this resulted in minimal interaction with other races. Lasting bonds were not formed with friends on campus, as the women mentioned that relationships ended a few months after graduating, as none of the parties made an effort to sustain the bonds. The women lived with their parents while they were at

university and had to continue to abide by Indian cultural norms as prescribed by family and community. Fathers controlled the women's external movements, and as young adults the women were still chaperoned by family members and had to obtain parents' permission to visit friends.

The women in the study belong to the first significant cohort of Indian females to enter corporate South Africa and reach senior and top managerial positions. After completing their studies, the women entered the world of work where they felt they would at last enjoy some measure of freedom. Little did the participants realize that they were entering the "corporate cage", where organisations comprised cultures that were alien to these women, who up to that point had been predominantly exposed only to Indian culture. The women entered the corporate world with strong Indian cultural and religious beliefs and naively believed it would be easy to chart their way to top managerial positions.

From my analysis of the participants' adult stories, it seems that gender, professional and racio-ethnic identities were themes which were salient in their lives. These identity themes are illustrated in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1: Identity salience in the corporate environment

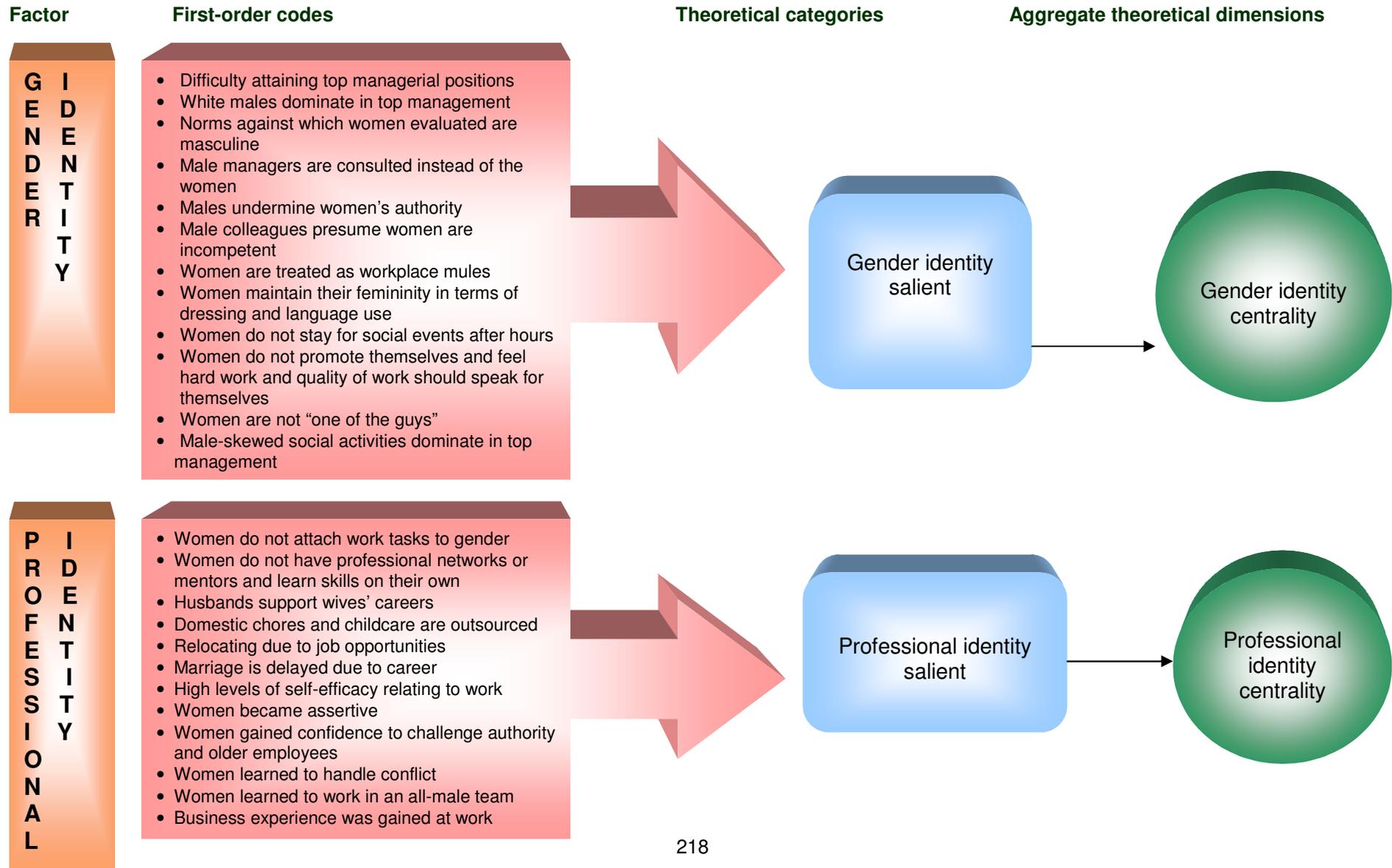
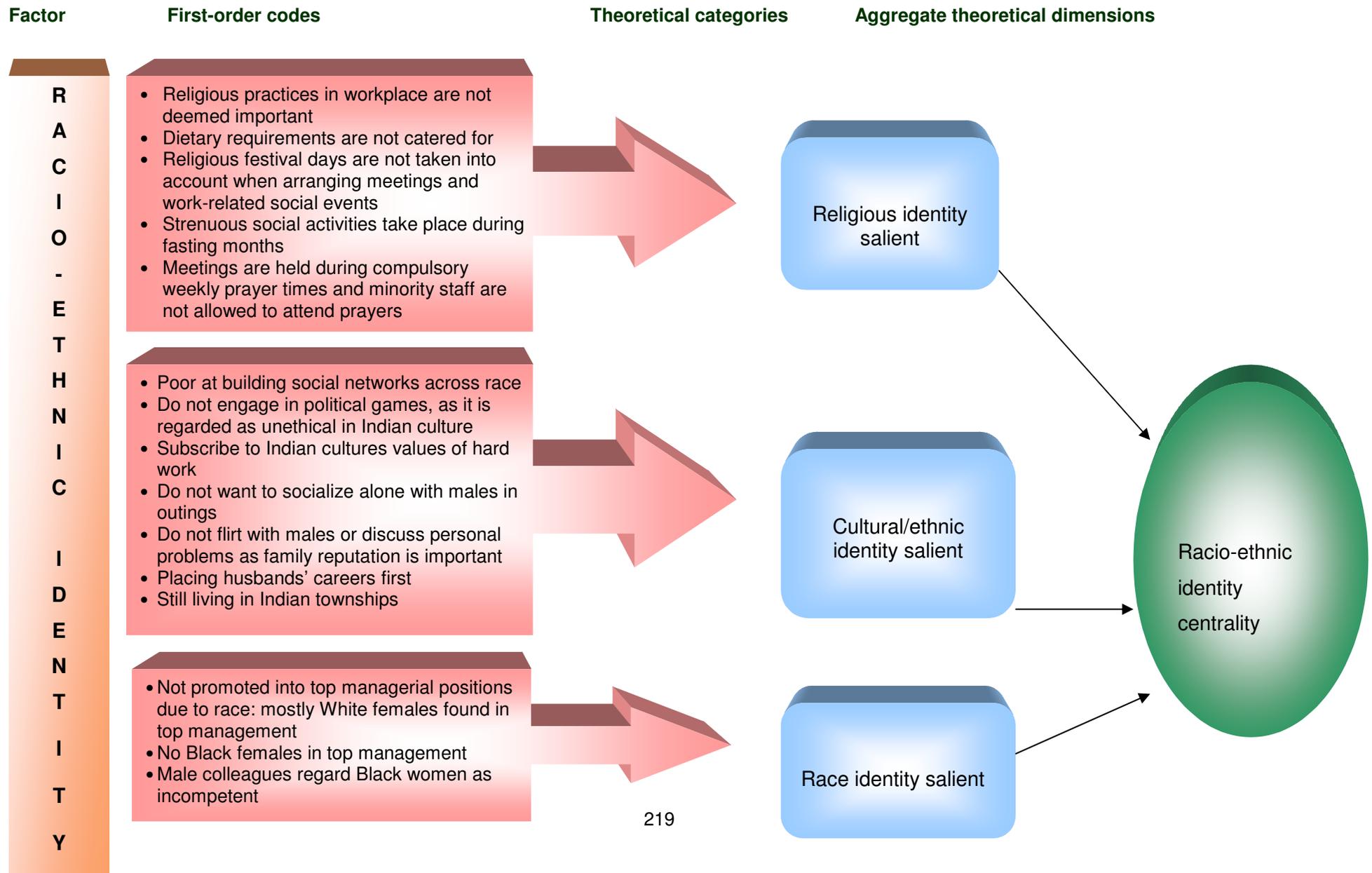
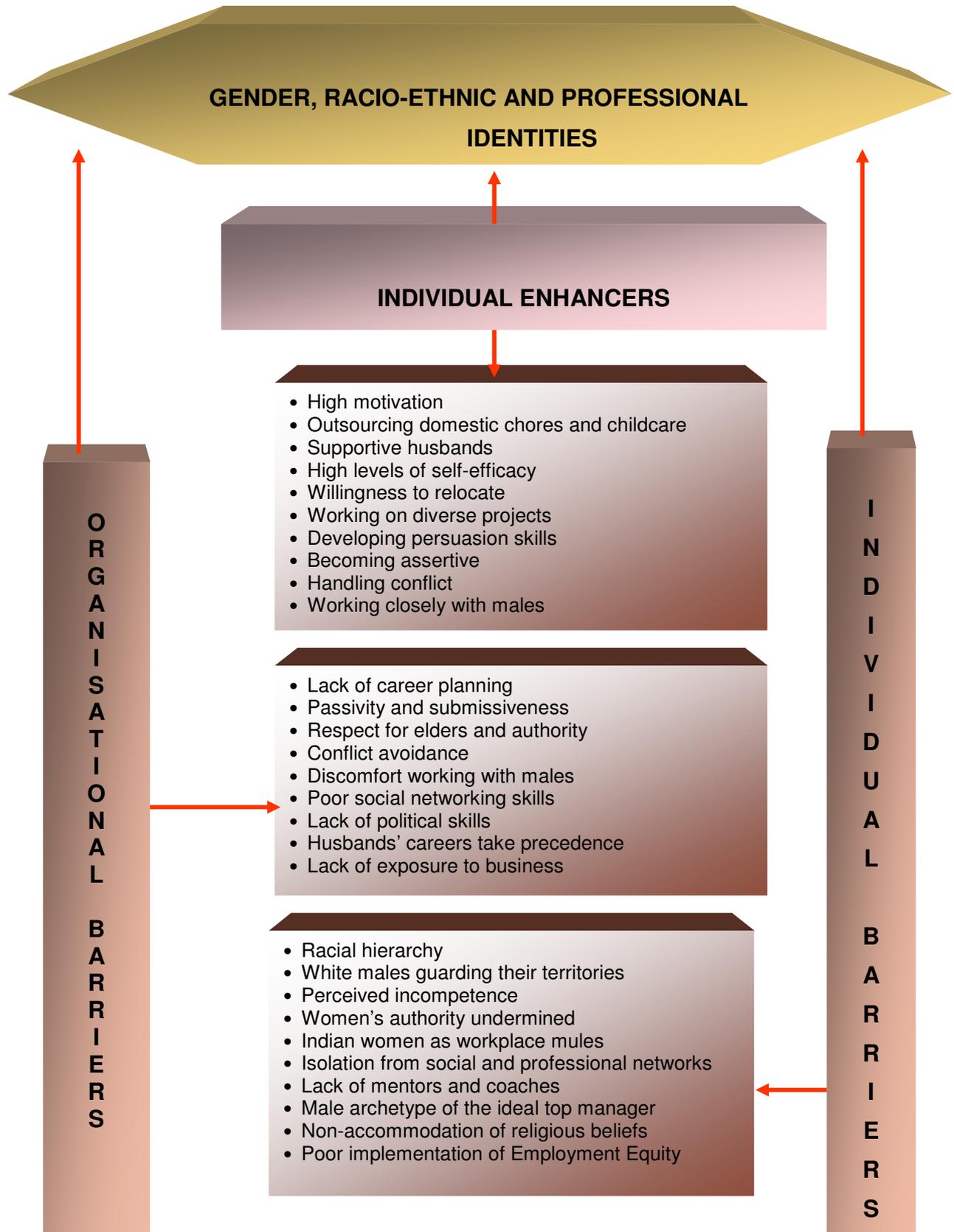


Figure 6.1 (Contd)



In unpacking gender, racio-ethnic and professional identities, I uncovered a gradual progressive adaptation to individual and organisational barriers and the development of individual factors that enhanced the participants' upward mobility. Figure 6.2 illustrates the individual and organisational barriers and the individual enhancing factors which formed part of the women's identity work.

Figure 6.2: Model of individual and organisational barriers and individual factors that enhance advancement forming part of women’s identity work



6.2 INDIVIDUAL BARRIERS TO ADVANCEMENT

The participants entered the South African workforce with values that clashed with the organisational cultures they encountered. The women modified some of their behaviour in order to advance, while other characteristics and elements were firmly ingrained and were difficult to change and acted as barriers to advancement. The individual factors that were regarded as barriers to advancement by the women were a lack of career planning, passivity and submissiveness, respect for elders and authority, conflict avoidance, discomfort working with males, poor social networking skills, a lack of political skills, husbands' careers taking precedence and a lack of exposure to business. These items are discussed in more detail below.

6.2.1 Lack of career planning

When the women first entered the workforce, they were not aware of the importance of planning their career trajectory. Because Indians had generally not had opportunities to move up the corporate hierarchy due to apartheid, there was no one to advise the women on how to plan their career routes. Their exposure to professionals was limited to non-corporate individuals such as teachers, nurses, and medical practitioners who operated their own medical practices and pharmacies, and lawyers managing private law practices within Indian townships. Most of the women's fathers ran small businesses or shops and were largely excluded from the corporate environment. Career counsellors, due to their lack of knowledge of the corporate environment, could not point out the career paths the women could follow in their respective professions, nor was such guidance obtained at university. As a result, the majority of women did not have structured plans regarding their career paths and their main focus was on getting jobs and establishing careers. Shabana, like the other women in the study, had never planned for a career, as her aim was just to get a job:

"It was a case of you had to go to university, get a qualification – that would enable you to get a job and earn a living."

Even after they entered corporate South Africa, the women did not proactively chart their future career paths with their managers. In retrospect, the women feel it is imperative to plan one's career at each stage. The women took advantage of the opportunities that were presented to them in terms of advancement and applied for promotions as posts became available, without knowing the career trajectory these higher posts would lead to. As the women progressed in their careers, the number of hours spent at the workplace increased as workloads became heavier, which left little time for further studies and engaging in developmental courses. Shamila's comment captures the outcome of a lack of career planning relating to the women's advancement within the workplace:

"It put me back personally a lot of years not planning properly for my career. It was not your career that you were concerned about but establishing and building back your foundation."

6.2.2 Passivity and submissiveness

Socialization into Indian culture was responsible for the majority of participants being passive when they entered the workplace. Being raised in a patriarchal society where males dominated, the women's voices were at first silenced and the transition to behaving assertively in the workplace was initially daunting. Colleagues perceived the women as subservient and took advantage of their silence. Shilpa was unassertive, like the other participants, when she first started working:

"I was more confident because when I came into that role I was already 12 years into my career. I would have been very different had I joined them earlier on. I would have been seen as non-assertive. I believe when I started working I was not as confident as I am now. I have grown my confidence over time."

Most of the women mentioned there is an element of passivity still present in their general orientation. The women realized that this is the case – when some of their less qualified, incompetent colleagues are promoted into higher level management positions, they accept it and do not protest against unfair organisational practices. The majority of these women did not take the initiative to ask to be developed further

in their respective careers. In Indian traditional culture, female needs are secondary to those of males, which may explain why the women in this study were not aggressive in seeking developmental opportunities. A quote from Shamila illuminates what was heard from other women in the study about the strong influence of Indian culture on their gender identity:

“We feel guilty and terrible for asking for what we need. I felt like I’m doing something horribly wrong as I sat there and expressed to them my needs. That is that I need further development and how they are not fulfilling it for me, and I need more support from them to move in a different direction. And I felt bad doing that. I felt bad because as Indian females our needs are placed second, third, fourth or fifth – it’s never first. It’s cultural and the way we’ve been raised. Up to today we behave that way and I was feeling bad for asking for what’s rightfully mine. We’re too loyal. We are concerned about what the next person will think of us. Are we making them feel bad? Then the ability to articulate what it is that we need. We lack confidence and assertiveness.”

6.2.3 Respect for elders and authority

The women had been taught to respect elders and not to question authority from a young age, and this behaviour was enforced by parents and the community. In most cases, fathers were instrumental in discouraging daughters from rebelling against supervisors, as male family members would not be able to provide protection in the workplace. Waheeda’s father, like most of the other participants’ fathers, inculcated respect for authority in her:

“I feel standing up for myself should have been inculcated in me a long time ago, so by the time I got to the workplace I could have also voiced my opinions with confidence. I must say my father always told me not to get onto the wrong side of my boss and to avoid confrontations and conflicts with them.”

The respect Saira had for elders was also a characteristic the other women in the study displayed:

“As Indians we are taught not to be outspoken towards our elders, as it denotes disrespect. I’ve got people reporting to me who are older than me. That’s the difficulty. It just doesn’t feel right, that you’re telling them what to do and you’re the instructor, you’re the authority figure and that’s where the awkwardness comes through. You learn to get over that.”

6.2.4 Conflict avoidance

The participants were raised in a culture where conflict, especially female engagement with it, was viewed negatively by the community. Fathers and brothers handled conflict situations outside the home. Conflict was avoided at all costs with neighbours, family and friends. Bipasha’s comments summarize the other women’s attitudes towards conflict:

“We didn’t realize it when we were growing up because we grew up in an all-Indian environment where people were nice to each other and we would stand together as a community. We did not experience any vulgarity and violence in our community because people were passive and everyone was concerned about their family name. We then came into the lion’s den, when you literally had to fight your way out of it and here other races do not worry about their reputations.”

The combination of conflict avoidance and passivity created a formidable individual barrier that the women had to overcome.

6.2.5 Discomfort working with males

Working closely in an all-male team is still a problem for the women who participated in the study, as Indian society frowns upon close relations between males and females who are not relatives. This fact is accentuated through religious precepts where intermingling of the sexes is prohibited, a point emphasised by most of these women. Mahima highlights the difficulty the women experience working in an all-male team:

“It was hard to adjust working closely with men in the workplace. It took me a few years getting used to being in male-only meetings and being in

charge of males because I had this innate shyness in me. I guess due to always being told by family not to mingle with men, and even in the school I went to, society's expectation was that we should be segregated although we attended a co-ed school."

6.2.6 Poor social networking skills

The women were successful at school and university due to working hard and adopted the same traits in the workplace. While the women were growing up, their fathers emphasised the relationship between hard work and professional success. Most of the women's parents had made a success of their businesses by working hard and they felt the same strategy could be used in the workplace. Since fathers were not exposed to the corporate environment, they could not advise their daughters adequately, and it was only by entering the workforce that the women realized that working hard was only part of the formula to success. The women soon learned that networking is also vital to being promoted. Mahima captures the women's fathers' encouragement relating to hard work:

"My dad always indicated if you want a better life you need to work hard in order to make life better. So that was something that has always driven me from school and there is the conditioning if you do well you will be successful. If you excel and give your best, you will be successful as well. So I think that was the kind of culture I grew up in."

The women who participated in the study tend to avoid social events at work and only attend when such functions are unavoidable. The women are aware that these functions are vital for upward mobility, but they still believed hard work and high work standards would lead to promotions. Shamila's comment is typical of the women's views relating to building relationships in the workplace:

"I find in building relationships with people you might not necessarily agree with what they stand for, but you have to have a relationship with them. And I don't think we are at all scaled up for this, not in the slightest. And you know simple things that we think are a waste of time like meet in the pub for cocktails and discuss business, we would avoid

it. We don't have other opportunities to build relationships and therefore it is important to attend such events."

In their current positions, the women are provided with opportunities to participate in golf outings but refuse to participate in an all-male group. The women mentioned that they do not play golf, as young adult females are not encouraged to engage in sport activities in Indian culture, due to prevailing notions about honour and shame. Family commitments are another reason the women are unable to learn how to play golf. The women also feel they are bound to hear malicious gossip through the grapevine from colleagues relating to being the only females participating in an all-male group. Since the women were socialized in a collectivist society where what others think of them is vital to their self-concept, they abstain from such outings. Another reason for abstaining from attending social events with males is that the women have a strong sense of what it means to be a respectable Indian female. The women also believe male subordinates who attend these outings may begin to view them as friends and that this might compromise the respect they should have with subordinates. Saira aptly describes the experiences of the participants relating to male-skewed social activities:

"When you go out to conferences they arrange activities like extreme adventure sport where you're swinging from tree tops or diving down cliffs or shark caves or going golfing – these are activities that don't appeal to me. It is a disadvantage, as it is a bonding experience because you find men at all levels can bond and identify with that sort of thing. So my junior can have a stronger and a better relationship with someone who is senior to me because they share common social activities."

These women also do not make time to socialize with female colleagues during the weekends or in the evenings. For the women, time is a precious commodity and they rather engage in activities with family than with friends or colleagues. Living in close proximity to large, close-knit extended families, even in their childhood, the women did not have a host of friends and associated with one or two classmates only. Likewise, in their adulthood, close bonds are not formed with female colleagues. The majority of women in the study have experienced jealousy from female colleagues

when they were promoted to higher managerial positions. The result is that the women are afraid of building close relationships with females at work. Most of the women reported having only one female friend that they confide in and they do not allow such relationships to extend beyond workplace boundaries. Also, maintaining family honour and dignity is of the utmost importance to the women, and they do not discuss their personal lives with workplace colleagues. Saira, like the rest of the women in the study, separates her work life from her personal life:

“There are certain women I have close relationships with, but I can’t say I have made a concerted effort with other women. With these women it is personalities that have clicked. I think women at senior positions can also be dangerous and they can be as bad as male colleagues. They tend to backstab you and you cannot trust them. They will do everything to ensure you do not get promoted and they move ahead of you. I guess I don’t trust any of the women I work with, and I have therefore not made the effort to get close to them. Especially when it is a limited group, there aren’t that many women who are promoted, women tend to be less supportive than men, they tend to be more critical and they tend to be more vocal about their criticisms as well. I tend to be more wary of women.”

6.2.7 Lack of political skills

The women do not believe in playing political games in order to enhance their careers. The women believe that, in a corporate environment, white males and females tend to play political games and are promoted because of that. Having been raised in an Indian culture that emphasises ethical behaviour and integrity, the women reported that political games are contrary to their value system. From a personal perspective, the women felt they do not have the savvy to play political games. Saira voiced the other women’s beliefs regarding playing political games:

“There tends to be a very traditional way executives are supposed to behave and there’s almost like a template; it’s very political – terribly political. A lot of your success can depend on relationships rather than ability. I’m hopeless at political skill because it’s dangerous when you’re

not a political player, because you don't help yourself as well. You can sit and watch people who are less hard working, stupider, but who have the savvy to bypass you. It's also because it does not feel ethical and I sit here and my hard work and everything I put out there, I feel should speak for itself and I shouldn't play funny games and if that's not good enough for this organisation then I'm not the right person for the organisation. I don't think it's any different in other organisations. Political skill leads to you battling with your conscience and you do and say something you don't believe in. I always lose respect for political players because you don't know when they're playing you."

6.2.8 Husbands' careers take precedence

Out of the 13 women interviewed, 10 were married, two were single and one was divorced. When I asked the married women if they would place their husbands' careers before their own professions, the women answered in the affirmative. The married women admitted they are still traditional and perform the subservient gender role of females in Indian culture and would therefore give priority to their husbands' professions. This type of socialization stems from Indian culture, where a wife places her concerns and her welfare second to her husband's. Although the husbands do not demand it, the married women still hold on to their cultural beliefs and values. Thus, the married women's careers become secondary to their husbands' professions. The married women in the study are, however, fortunate as their husbands have never requested their wives to place their careers on the back burner. Waheeda's words reflect the attitudes of the other married participants towards their husbands' professions:

"We have shared our career dreams with each other, but I will give up my job in order to promote him. As an Indian female my household duties take precedence and his job takes precedence, as is the traditional expectation."

6.2.9 Lack of exposure to business

Although most of the participants' fathers had their own businesses, commercial skills were taught to sons only. Fathers did not nurture their daughters' business talent when these women were growing up and this has had negative consequences in the workplace as they had to learn simple financial transactions, negotiation and persuasion skills in the corporate environment. The women entered the workplace with only theoretical knowledge and rudimentary experiential exposure. These women did not have the confidence to express their opinions in front of males for fear of being embarrassed, due to their lack of practical business skills. When they initially started working, they lagged behind their peers in terms of business skills and had to put in extra effort to catch up, which, however, they did within a short period, exceeding expectations. Shabana, for example, had not been exposed to business when she was growing up and this had a negative impact on her when she first entered the corporate environment:

"...how was I expected to become a chartered accountant when my first experience of a cheque book was when I first actually started working? I opened up a bank account and I got my own cheque book. Or the first time was when I went out to audit and how do you audit... when you've never seen an audit before?"

Having discussed the individual barriers these women encountered, I can now focus on the organisational barriers the women described as stumbling blocks on their career ladder.

6.3 ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

The organisational barriers the women faced were the racial hierarchy, white males guarding their territories, perceived incompetence, the women's authority being undermined, Indian women being treated as workplace mules, isolation from social and professional networks, a lack of mentors and coaches, male archetypes of the ideal manager, non-accommodation of religious beliefs, and poor implementation of employment equity.

6.3.1 Racial hierarchy

The government's policy of apartheid not only played a detrimental role when the women were growing up, but continued to have an effect on their workplace experiences. During the apartheid years, the division of labour in South African organisations was structured along the lines of race, as well as gender. Through the Job Reservations Act, skilled and supervisory jobs were reserved for whites, while low-paying unskilled jobs were allocated to blacks (including Indian females). Training was also affected by job reservation, as it focused on skilled jobs reserved for whites (Daniel, Habib, & Southall, 2003). The women who participated in the study did not have the luxury of choosing the organisations they wanted to work for and settled for organisations that provided them with job opportunities. Waheeda, like most of the women, felt she was held back in her career progression due to apartheid:

"I applied to enter the workforce in the apartheid days just before Mandela came into power, but was constantly rejected. There were two or three firms that would take on whites only, and I remember one particular firm telling me (and this was just after Mandela came into power and introduced Affirmative Action) they would rather pay the fine than to take on people of colour. They will only take whites on. This pushed me back a few years, as I could have had those extra few years of experience in the workplace and been in a higher position today."

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, when these women first entered the workplace, apartheid was still rife in South Africa. Managers did not envision that Indian female personnel would one day be promoted to managerial positions and subsequently did not provide advice on career trajectories. These women were promoted after working in their respective organisations for an average of seven years. One of the main reasons the women gave for their being promoted was that, due to the demise of apartheid, previously black employees stagnated at lower levels. Saira's organisation did not have any succession or career plans for black junior employees, and similar issues were noted by the other women at their companies:

“The organisation I’m working in does not have proper succession planning nor do managers assist in career planning.”

6.3.2 White males guarding their territories

The women experienced organisational culture as patriarchal, in that male managers dominate, and this is a major barrier to the advancement of Indian women. Although the women have been in their respective workplaces, on average, for 12 years, most do not hope to advance to top managerial positions, as male managers are blocking their advancement. The women reported that top management positions are dominated by white males, who prefer appointing white females. In rare cases they appoint African females. In Bipasha’s organisation white males and females are recruited for top managerial positions, which is also the case in the companies most of the other women work for:

“White males and white females find it easier to get to the top and in our organisation- they are still in the majority in top managerial positions.”

6.3.3 Perceived incompetence

Most of the women in the study had experienced sexist behaviour, especially from white and Indian male colleagues. Many of the women shared being targeted by senior white male colleagues who constantly challenged their expertise in their respective professions. Most of the women ensured that they became even more knowledgeable in their respective fields and even anticipated the questions male managers would pose and prepared well before entering meetings so as to counter attacks. The challenges that Rani encountered from male colleagues are typical of the stories shared by the participants:

“In my last position I was the only female in Company B and from the time I walked into that company, I was like a dartboard. Three white men were aiming darts at me all the time. They were all my colleagues. I think you don’t have to be quiet, you have to be active. Because what was happening is every decision I made I had to substantiate and they

found a problem with everything I did. To the extent it became personal where I had to look over my shoulder and that is not normal.”

The prescribed roles and subordinate positions of women in Indian society seem to spill over into the workplace. The women in the study found that their Indian male colleagues preferred the opinions of white males and females, and ignoring the participants. For example, the women spoke of being ignored by Indian males during meetings. The women believe this stems from internalized racism and sexism, and the concomitant belief that white males and females are more intelligent and experienced in their jobs than Indian females. In addition, the women believed it also stems from the beliefs that Indian males have regarding Indian females, namely that Indian women are homemakers and should not be in the corporate environment. The women feel that because Indian males are accustomed to taking unilateral decisions in their homes and treat their sisters, wives, daughters and mothers as subordinate, they perpetuate the same type of behaviour towards Indian females in the workplace. Saira’s remarks about Indian male behaviour towards professional Indian females captures what was generally heard from the other women:

“Indian males don’t like Indian females being in higher positions – they constantly challenge them and they want to always show their women are not capable of doing the job. Once again – Indian male pride which comes from the Indian culture.”

6.3.4 Women’s authority undermined

The women in the study found that male managers prefer to discuss important issues with their male managers and by-pass the women. Although the women feel that they have been promoted on merit, they believe that the perception amongst most senior male managers is that these women are filling the quotas as per legislative requirements and are incompetent to make strategic decisions. Shamila elaborates on the lack of confidence many male managers appear to have toward Indian females in managerial positions:

“I’m in charge of doing all changes on applications and I was instructed by my GM that we will tolerate no change. So HR wanted a change and

I sent an e-mail and said under the current circumstances we cannot afford to make any changes, and can you please prepare a countermeasure to the problem that you have. The HR Manager wanted a meeting with my GM. I set up a meeting with the GM. The GM wanted me at the meeting because I was in charge. So I went for the meeting. The guy says to me, I am not starting this meeting if your GM is not here. So I said to him I am in charge here. He says I am not having the meeting with you and he banged the table and spoke harshly to me. So I said, in that case, I'm leaving and you can have a discussion with my GM. I phoned the GM and said: apparently having the title means nothing. I will not tolerate the bad manners I'm exposed to so I'm leaving and will you please come and I left."

Saira, like the other women, believes that one needs to be assertive in order to be heard:

"Unless you are the sort of person who's willing to dig in your heels and say, no, I've got an opinion and I want to be heard, you can easily be brushed aside. I mean that's where I am right now. It hasn't been easy. The entire road here has been to prove that you're actually not as good as, but you are actually better than most. So it hasn't been an automatic acceptance."

The participants encountered problems with lower-level male employees of all races. The biggest problem encountered was the refusal of males to take instructions from women. This stems from the general patriarchal nature of the Afrikaner, English, Indian and African cultures in South Africa. During apartheid, women were legally regarded as minors and the majority of males have been raised believing that women should not be obeyed, as men are rulers in the homes. Since men are socialized to believe they should not be controlled by women, such behaviour spills over into the workplace to the detriment of all women. However, in the case of Indian women, this is exacerbated by their being from a race that was perceived to be inferior during apartheid. Rani described an incident in which she experienced insubordination from one of her male lower-level employees:

“I had to dismiss one individual who reported directly to me. He was the HR manager. What he was doing was impacting negatively on me. I had no alternative but to dismiss him. It seemed as if I was speaking to myself. Nothing I said was heeded to, nothing I ever said was right. I was doing his work for him, because whatever work I would ask him to do, he would refuse.

So I had to manage his performance and eventually I had to terminate his services. He took the company to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) which resolves labour disputes, but I represented the organisation and we won the case. Males generally don't like reporting to females.”

6.3.5 Indian women as workplace mules

The participants believed that all professional women in their workplaces had to work harder than males to prove themselves. However, they believed that as Indian women they had to work even harder because they could not refuse work assignments, as doing so would jeopardize their opportunities for promotion. Thus, the women in the study do not refuse work assigned by their managers, even if they are already overextended. There is a strong need to make a good impression on their managers, and to do so, they tend to go the extra mile and end up working more than others. The more the women work, the greater the demands of male managers become. The result is that these women are often bogged down with too much administrative work and take fewer strategic decisions. In the end, their willingness to take on the extra assignments works against their promotion prospects, because they are then told they lack the strategic skills required for success in top managerial positions. This results in an untenable catch-22 situation for the women. Bipasha's experiences illustrate this dynamic:

“As Indian females we are hard-working and accepting. Every time they restructure and retrench people, you accept more on your plate. That's what happened to me. They restructured and retrenched the legal person and I took over the legal portfolio. My position grew from credit to include legal. They restructured again and gave me the billing

environment. I was one senior person doing three people's work. They do compensate you by giving you a couple of thousand rand but I'm doing three senior people's jobs and not getting their salaries. I saw it as new challenges and growth opportunities. I should have been promoted to a higher position. If I was not passive and was more aggressive, I should not have accepted the position. I thought I'm moving from a senior to an executive level because if I leave it there are two white males fighting for the position, so let me rather take the position and fight while I'm there, but that transition never happens the way you want it to."

Shamila's reference to her administrative duties is indicative of the lack of time the women in the study had for strategic decisions:

"In some cases, the men recognize women are very good at certain tasks but, most importantly, they use the women to do all the real detailed work. So what happens? As a female, you are getting bogged down with loads and loads of detailed work which limits your ability to actually manage at a higher level. When I'm talking of detailed work I'm talking of detailed administrative work."

6.3.6 Isolation from social and professional networks

During the interviews, the women in the study talked a great deal about the isolation they experienced as a result of their solo status in their organisations. When they initially entered the workplace, the women held solo status in their respective units and found that members of other races tended to form same-race social groups and networks. These groups were rarely welcoming. The women described a feeling of being "in-betweeners"-- belonging neither to the white group nor to the African group in their organisations. This phenomenon largely reflects the status of Indians within the racial hierarchy established under apartheid. Indians were not as privileged as whites nor were they as disadvantaged as black Africans under apartheid.

At the same time, gender was also a factor. The "old boys' network" is still very prevalent in male-dominated South African organisations and it was difficult for the

women to penetrate these networks. Interestingly, they also shared their experience that Indian males did not interact with them at social events or invite them into their networks at work. As noted previously, this represented not only a spill-over from Indian culture where males and females do not interact casually, but also from the gendered nature of the workplaces in which they worked.

Mahima captured the discomfort the women experience at social gatherings:

“This usually happens when we have a social event and you attend it and then the Afrikaners will converse in Afrikaans and the Africans will talk in their own language and I find it difficult to follow either conversation. They make no effort to include you in the conversation and to me that is a form of racism. I was raised not to talk in my language when there are others who don’t understand you. It is very difficult in such situations being the only Indian female in the group. I definitely will not latch on to the Indian males as they will regard me as being forward.”

The women commented on the differential access of white and Indian females to senior white male managers during social events. The women found white males tended to accommodate white females in their conversations, but do not make the same effort with Indian females. White females are also able to converse with white males on topics such as sports, farming and hunting, which Indian females are not familiar with as such activities do not form part of the Indian culture. As a result, the women feel uncomfortable and marginalized and tend to leave social events early. Shamila described the ease with which white women converse with males at social events:

“In the white society, the women have been through the stage we’re at now and they have moved on. So when they’re in a social gathering they can discuss topics with their uncles and fathers and they’re comfortable discussing these things. But we’re not – we haven’t got that. It doesn’t come with our socializing that we do when we’re growing up. It certainly does not come from the socializing we do when we’re women – in fact, it gets worse because you ought to know better.”

The majority of the women believe that currently, with more females in managerial positions, there is less pressure to socialize after work and over weekends, as females typically have more responsibility for taking care of their homes and families. Shamila, like the other women, does not feel much pressure to attend social events after work:

“A couple of years back, you had to be one of those drinkers. You had to go to the pub and discuss things, and now with more women in management you don’t have to. Women have different pressures. They know they need to go home and see to their families.”

The participants mentioned that they do not belong to any professional networks related to their careers, as they did not believe such groups would be beneficial in advancing their careers. In hindsight, the women realize that not building on professional networks has disadvantaged them in establishing contacts outside their current workplaces. The women mentioned that the repercussions of having limited networks outside their immediate workplaces are a disadvantage, because there is then limited opportunity for them to move to other organisations and higher managerial positions. Preity’s attitude reflects what was generally heard from the women:

“No, I am not affiliated to any organisations – if I want to advance my career, I will do it on my own.”

6.3.7 Lack of mentors and coaches

The participants complained of a lack of mentors and coaches in their journey towards senior managerial positions. Although supervisors advised them on work-related issues and provided them with opportunities to grow within their respective work units, mentoring and coaching was not provided in an informal or a formal way. The women believed that a lack of coaches has hampered them in their upward mobility, as advancement would have been much quicker and higher through the guidance and networks provided by mentors. The women found that at lower levels, white males are willing to share work-related information, but white females tend to

be insecure and do not want to impart their knowledge. Waheeda, like the majority of women in the study, never had a mentor:

“I feel had I had a mentor I would have become more assertive and less passive much earlier in my career, and at least a mentor could have made me more visible with the dominant people in the organisation, and I would have been able to deal more effectively with some of the challenges I am faced with in the organisation. At least a mentor would have guided me in how to go about resolving some of the issues. A mentor could have acted as a buffer against me being discriminated against and at least I could have had a friend within the organisation I could have trusted and who could have been my confidant. Perhaps I would have had more confidence in approaching certain issues head on and not been afraid of being victimized. That is something that has been missing in terms of my development.”

6.3.8 Male archetypes regarding the ideal manager

The participants are aware that the preferred management style in top management is masculine. The participants do not want to adopt masculine dressing and management styles and mannerisms, as maintaining their femininity is a vital part of their self-concept. The women found that men in top management have their own rules, which are male-centred, such as having meetings during the evenings when females are unable to attend. In a way, this could also count against the females and their moving into top managerial positions, as they are often unable to attend such evening meetings. Shamila pointed out the leadership styles preferred in South African organisations:

“Men are preferred in leadership positions because there is a perception that men are born leaders and if you think about a management position, you automatically think a male will be occupying the position. I guess we have these stereotypical beliefs.”

6.3.9 Non-accommodation of religious beliefs

Most of the women felt that because they are members of a racial/ethnic minority group, in the corporate world, managers do not take cognizance of their religious festivities, and continue to schedule important meetings and events on festival days. Although the women do make the organisers of these meetings aware of their festival days, these requests are usually ignored. The result is that the women have been working during their festivities. Another problem the women encountered is that organisations are lax in accommodating their dietary requirements. The women are either not accommodated or food is not purchased from the requested outlets. Bipasha's gripe against the organisation's not accommodating her religious beliefs is a problem shared by most of the other women as well:

"It's sometimes a bit difficult because we don't eat pork and beef and Muslims eat halaal. They do cater for our dietary requirements, but it is up to us to remind them each time there is a function. If you forget to inform them about your dietary requirements, then you stay without the food. They cater for a Western environment where they serve pork, beef and salads and no halaal food. When we go out for team building, I consider people's dietary requirements. I make sure we cut for prayer time on Friday for our Muslim colleagues so they can pray. But that's not done in all departments. In certain white-dominated departments they do not consider minority people's religious practices. They are not sensitive to other religions and even though it has been explained to them that it is a religious observation, they don't care."

6.3.10 Poor implementation of Employment Equity

Employment equity legislation worked in the women's favour, until they reached senior management positions. Beyond this point, rubbing shoulders with top management became the criterion for upward mobility. The participants believe that top management in their respective organisations is not concerned with employment equity legislation and is willing to pay the fines imposed for non-compliance by the Department of Labour. The women mentioned the perception in corporate South Africa is that there are too many Indians in management and therefore their

organisations are no longer promoting and recruiting Indian females. For the women in the study, this assumption is flawed, as in their respective organisations they are sometimes the only Indian females in management. Saira voiced the concern the other women feel relating to the misconception that there are too many Indians occupying managerial positions in corporate South Africa:

“There is a perception that there are too many Indians in management and that makes it bad for us. Even here, I hear there are too many Indians. Yet when I look around I don’t see many Indians. We are just a handful. Like I said, in my division I am the only Indian female and now I’m talking at all levels. There are no other females at lower levels. We are at least a few hundred people in our division and yet no Indian females, except me. So I can’t understand why they say we are too many Indians.”

Another dilemma facing the participants was that organisations are paying more attention to promoting according to race and not gender. The result is that more Indian males are being promoted, compared to Indian females. The women therefore feel despondent of ever advancing into top managerial positions. The few women in the study who had advanced to top managerial positions in their respective organisations admitted that entry into these positions would not have been possible without networking through involvement in various projects. Shamila commented on the tendency in organisations to focus on recruiting to fill quotas according to race and to discount gender:

“They only look at racial discrimination and not gender discrimination. That is why there are hardly any Indian females in the organisation and there are more Indian males.”

Having discussed the individual and organisational barriers faced by the women in advancing in the workplace, I move on to discuss the factors that enhance upward mobility at the individual level.

6.4 INDIVIDUAL FACTORS THAT ENHANCED THE PARTICIPANTS' PROGRESS

The individual factors that promoted the women's upward career mobility that emerged from the interviews were high motivation, outsourcing domestic chores and childcare, supportive husbands, high levels of self-efficacy, willingness to relocate, working on diverse projects, developing persuasion skills, becoming assertive, challenging authority and elders, handling conflict and working closely with males.

6.4.1 High motivation

I wanted to understand what motivated these women to pursue careers outside the home, despite early socialization which dictates that women should work in the home. The women mentioned that they worked because their families depended on their additional income, due to adverse life situations such as losing a father through death or divorce, and husbands needing financial assistance in maintaining the home. Rani, like the rest of the women, worked to assist her family financially:

"For the last say about 12-13 years, I have taken care of my parents in all aspects of their lives because my father was ill. So I think my need to succeed and all of that was even greater than an average person because though I did not have kids to support I had a family that needed me financially, emotionally and in all areas of life."

Most of the women I interviewed mentioned that even if they did not have adverse life conditions, they would continue working. One reason was that, growing up as tomboys, they could not adjust to adopting the housewifely role in their adulthood. The majority of these women still do not enjoy cooking and housework and engage in such chores only as part of their gender role in their homes. Bipasha's comment is typical of the other women's attitude toward "feminine" chores:

"I hate cooking. I cook because I have to put a meal on the table for my family."

6.4.2 Outsourcing domestic chores and childcare

The women agreed they would not have been able to cope with the demands of work and housework had it not been for the possibility of outsourcing such chores to domestics and *au pairs* who took care of their children. Although the women have learned to minimize child care and household duties, the responsibility for the home still rests on their shoulders. Assistance from extended family members is sometimes requested, especially when the women go out of town on business trips. Shilpa's comment reflected the sentiments of the other women regarding outsourcing household and childcare duties to others:

“Our set-up with our au pair and our domestic is very settled. There’s not much to do when I’m not there. I also bring my mother-in-law to live with us when I go overseas, like I’ve just come back last week from overseas. So she comes and stays with us and she spoils us. I use my mother, father, mother-in-law and sister-in-law. I’m not afraid to ask for help. And I think women in powerful and senior positions must ask for help.”

Even as adults, the women do not identify with the gender role their mothers subscribed to, as they are motivated by their careers. Most of the women mentioned that a major bone of contention between them and their mothers was housework and taking care of children. Mothers could not understand why their daughters did not focus more on the children and housework. In turn, the participants felt that their mothers did not understand the importance of their careers and the number of hours one needs to spend on work in order to be successful. Shamila describes the problems she, like most of the other women in the study, had regarding taking care of the home and children:

“Being a good housewife was the biggest issue we had. My mother felt an Indian female’s home and children should take precedence above all other things. Of course, I would make sure there was food in the house and the house is tidy. But I couldn’t do everything – I couldn’t be career focused and come home and downscale and switch off and get into the housewifely mode. That was extremely difficult for me, but it was more

difficult for her, because she could not understand why I was not like that... Previously it was such an issue for her to see the lack of homely skills, but in the end she realized you could be the career woman and get someone to manage your home without you doing it, you know.”

6.4.3 Supportive husbands

The majority of the women in the study had delayed marriage after completing their studies and worked for a few years before settling down. In this study, 67 per cent of the women married at an average age of 28, because it was difficult to find partners in the Indian community who would accept professional wives. The mindset of the Indian community was that women should be at home taking care of children and not focused on their careers. Mahima elaborated on her views of marriage, which the other women also endorsed:

“The traditional role has always been that by the time you’re 20, 22, 25 you should be married and already starting your family. Now with my mom that was what she did, but it does not necessarily reflect that is what I’m going to do or that is what I would have done. And you know, as much as parents want their children to be married and as much as children want to be married, it doesn’t have to happen in a particular time frame, in a particular time span because things are very different now. So from that perspective I think very differently from my mom.”

In the majority of cases, the participants are in dual career couple relationships. Two of the women, however, are married to men who are lower-level employees, resulting in the wives being the breadwinners in the family. Since the majority of the participants’ husbands have equally demanding jobs as managers, they are fully aware of the challenges their wives are facing on a daily basis. These husbands therefore do not make unnecessary demands at home. The women mentioned that their biggest support relating to career advancement are their husbands, who have egalitarian views relating to career-oriented Indian females. These women’s husbands always encourage them to excel and mentor them to handle difficult situations with personnel at work. Since these husbands also work late in the evenings, they understand the need for their wives to be working late. When the

women are working late, husbands take care of the children and cook the evening meals, as in the majority of cases domestics do not work in the evenings. The women's husbands do not request elaborate meals, as is the custom in most Indian homes. The women felt that they were fortunate to have found spouses who encourage them and allow them to follow their careers. Sushmita's husband, like the other women's husbands, is her confidant and best friend:

"One of my big mentors and my friend although I don't always acknowledge that is my husband."

Bipasha echoed the sentiments of the other women when she described the support she obtained from her husband:

"If I owe anything it would be to my husband. He was extremely supportive. He did not expect me as a wife to cook. He is the sort of person who would come home and put up a pot of food and see to the kids. If I'm gone off on a business trip he used to take care of the kids. I think it's him and the support he gave me that made things possible."

6.4.4 High levels of self-efficacy

The participants displayed a high level of self-efficacy relating to their work. The women are confident in their skills and abilities and have extensive knowledge in fields unrelated to their job portfolios. The women did not want to point to affirmative action as the reason for being promoted, as they saw it as a barrier. Instead, they gave credit to the quality of their work, the Indian work ethic and the values they learned as young Indian women, their hard work and their adherence to high work standards that has resulted in their success. Preity believes that an individual's ability to do the job should be the main criterion for promotion. Race and gender should play a secondary role in promotions, a belief the other women in the study also subscribe to:

"It's all about your work ethics and your potential to do the job. You don't just advance a person because of skin colour and gender. Even as Indian females we need to prove ourselves. We should not be window dressers just so they can say they have an Indian female up there."

6.4.5 Willingness to relocate

The Indian culture does not encourage unmarried women to live on their own. I was surprised to find that fathers who upheld traditional Indian culture and norms and would not allow their daughters to go out unchaperoned and monitored their every move outside the home even as adults allowed their daughters to relocate. The majority of the women in the study had relocated for better job opportunities. Many parents found it difficult at first to allow their daughters to live on their own, but eventually supported their relocation, as it meant the women would advance in their careers. Relocating was therefore not out of choice but out of necessity.

In other instances, the organisations the women were working for relocated them to branches overseas in order for them to be exposed to other aspects of the business and thereafter be promoted. In most cases, the Indian communities and their extended families frowned upon the women's relocation, as they felt Indian females are supposed to be living in their parents' homes and not alone. This led the women not to broadcast their business trips, but to keep them a family secret, as their parents would be reprimanded by the Indian community and extended family for allowing their daughters too much freedom. This again suggests that the participants' fathers did not stand between the women and their success in their respective careers.

Shabana voiced the trepidation the women felt in obtaining permission from their parents to relocate due to work-related needs:

"I had to convince them to go overseas. Ultimately they agreed because it was going to further my career and my progress and they had never stood in the way of that. I convinced my brother who convinced my parents. Ja, they let me go and again it was very difficult for them. People thought it and said it, but they didn't say any of it to my father. They spoke about it amongst themselves and they said it to my mother. 'How can you let her go? She's never going to come back.'"

6.4.6 Working on diverse projects

One strategy that most of the women in the study used to enhance their visibility in their respective workplaces was to get involved in various projects outside their scope of work. Shilpa provides one good example from the various projects she was involved in. She specialised in recruitment and selection, but when her manager informed the staff that he needed volunteers to conduct company-wide presentations to the various departments on how organisational restructuring would affect their jobs, she was the only one in her section that jumped at the opportunity. She, like the other women, volunteered her services every time there were new projects, as she felt that this would enhance her visibility and chances of being noticed by other managers.

Because the women were not able to achieve visibility through social networks, they used this strategy toward being promoted, as managers from other sections in their departments became aware of their potential. Also, when applying for promotions, these women could outsmart their colleagues, as they had a broader knowledge of the various functions within their respective departments and managers were already aware of the quality of their work. The women learned to network with different managers on a formal basis through various job assignments. Like most of the other participants, Shilpa enhanced her visibility by involving herself in diverse projects:

“So I had goals to get to the next level and I took small steps to reach my target. I asked myself: what should I do to get to a top management position? Which projects should I be involved in? Where can I make a positive contribution? I decided on the projects I wanted to be involved in and the managers I wanted to network with. I have in the past not involved myself in certain meetings and projects and I wish I had, as I would have been able to network better. So I think where my confidence was lacking at the time, my interest was there. I would say to people who want to get ahead you have to push yourself. So let’s say if I didn’t like IR I wouldn’t get involved in it, but it may have affected my knowledge later on because I had no knowledge of it. If I had gotten involved at the time, it would have been better for me. So did I network? Not in a deliberate way when you think of networking as rubbing

shoulders; wining, dining, having coffee and teas – not in that way – it was more through being involved in the right thing and being seen in the right places.”

6.4.7 Developing persuasion skills

Another skill the participants developed was the ability to convince senior managers to make certain decisions. The women mentioned that it took them on average five to six years to become experts in their respective fields. Once the women had gained confidence in their ability to do a job well, they were willing to propose different solutions to problems facing their departments. Shamila gave an example of top managers' considering suggestions by females who are experts in their fields:

“In an automotive environment the chances of them actually listening to me were slim. Partly because I was in a lower position but I have the same responsibility now in a senior management position as I had then. It was also because I was not visible and I was in the background and doing all this work. Suddenly this project started blowing from all ends and I stabilized it and then they started listening to me as they realized that I knew my job. After that I could convince them of many strategic decisions as they started listening to my suggestions.”

Shilpa, like the other women in the study, realized that she had to develop her persuasion skills in order to make a positive impact on her supervisor:

“When I engage with people I’m not thinking of myself as a female, I’m thinking of myself in terms of what I’m trying to achieve. So my career path at Company X was never affected by my being Indian or being female. What I think affected my progress more was style, confidence, being able to influence and impact and that I had to learn to do – those were new skills for me.”

The women were socialized in Indian culture to be passive, to respect authority and their elders, to avoid conflict and not work closely with males who were not relatives. Upon entering the corporate workplace, the women realized that these Indian

cultural norms were in conflict with organisational values relating to career advancement. The women therefore decided to adapt some of their behaviours according to organisational requirements in order to enhance their chances of upward mobility. The changes in their behaviour which the women mentioned related to becoming assertive and handling conflict and working closely with males.

6.4.8 Becoming assertive

The women were subservient when they first entered the workplace and their managers realized this. The women were afraid of speaking out, because they had witnessed when they were growing up that girls who behaved assertively were reprimanded by their elders for being “aggressive”. In the workplace, the women found that assertive behaviour was welcomed. Most of the women were encouraged by their managers to be outspoken and assertive. Managers would place them in situations where they were forced to voice their opinions because they wanted the women to stand up for their rights. Once the women realized this aspect of the expectations of their respective managers, they slowly started voicing their opinions, although it was initially difficult for them to do so. In time, speaking out became easier and resulted in the women becoming more self-assured and confident. Preity pinpointed the fear the women had of displaying assertive behaviour:

“That’s the problem in Indian cultures – we do not become as independent as people in other cultures because we have to suppress our views and thoughts. You find out that you are slightly behind and you don’t express your views so people think that you just follow other people and it is a problem when you grow up. At work when you don’t express your views you are regarded as being passive. Luckily for me, as I grew older and I started working, I became more confident and more independent and now I speak my mind. When I started at Company M, I was very shy and I felt what if I say the wrong thing to people I will be reprimanded, so this went on for two years, but I started opening up when I realized people were expecting me to express my views. The reason I was afraid to say the wrong thing is at home I would get reprimanded for saying the wrong thing and that is why I was so afraid to speak my mind. I felt I would get reprimanded by my

colleagues. So as the years went on, then since 2002 I became very expressive and very confident.”

The organisational culture thus dictates that, in order to move up the corporate hierarchy, the participants would have to provide solutions to problems, which could end up not coinciding with the views of managers.

To climb the corporate ladder, the women could not allow themselves to be intimidated by older employees. Because of the changing demographics of the South African corporate workplace, the women in this study were often placed in positions where they had to work with older employees and managers. Although it was not easy and was in contradiction to their core beliefs and values, the women learned to present contradictory opinions to their supervisors and to assert themselves with older employees. Due to the nature of their jobs, the women learned to present views and handle disagreements in a dignified manner. Shamila, like the other women, learned to overcome her passive behaviour when she could no longer tolerate being bullied and treated unfairly by supervisors and older employees:

“Even if the superior is wrong, it is such bad manners to challenge him and especially if it is an older person. And now you come into an environment and I remember I was not getting a good enough bonus and I kept quiet and eventually I couldn’t take it anymore. I asked my supervisor why was I not getting a bonus and they [she shows respect here and therefore uses the plural ‘they’ instead of you to denote respect for an elder and superior as is the norm in the Indian culture] said well you are not assertive enough. I said you are confusing bad manners with assertiveness. We expect as our superior, our teacher, our mentor, as our manager, as our boss you would see who we are, you would understand who we are and you would write to us that sort of motivation. And his answer was I can see nothing, you have to tell me. It’s totally different from the way we are brought up – totally, totally different. It took me a long time to learn that.”

6.4.9 Handling conflict

The participants had to learn that conflict was not always negative and they had to develop the skills they needed to handle conflict situations and build on dealing with confrontational situations in the workplace. The women experienced females from other races as being assertive and confrontational. The women realized that if they did not learn to handle conflict constructively, they would be perceived as docile, and senior managers would not consider them for advancement. Once the women came to terms with the fact that conflict is a part of organisational life and is an aspect that has to be handled in a proactive manner, they learned to deal with it in a professional way. Shamila's comment epitomises the changing views of the women relating to conflict:

“As Indian women, we are not encouraged to quarrel the whole day with our neighbours and friends. We tend to overlook a lot of things that once you come into the workplace you realize you cannot overlook. For example, if a subordinate does not do his or her job, you need to take that person on and not ignore the issue just because you want to avoid conflict.”

6.4.10 Working closely with males

The participants realized that, while working with males who are not relatives is frowned upon in Indian society, the male presence in the corporate workplace is ubiquitous. Working with males is an inevitable part of corporate life. The women therefore decided that, since they are unable to avoid interacting with males, they should adopt a professional relationship with the men they worked with. To prove to me that their work-related relationships with males were based on professional interactions only, several of the participants commented that none of them had married their male colleagues. Mahima highlights the difficulties and reservations the women experienced working with males, but eventually overcame:

“When it came to addressing young and middle aged Indian males, I would shy away from it all. The reason being that Indian females are usually in the background when it comes to social gatherings and the

men give the speeches and are in the forefront in gatherings and this type of mentality makes it difficult to be out there. So in that sense, when I started off in management, I used to feel self-conscious when addressing a room full of males, which I had to do on several occasions in my career. So, one of the challenges facing women is that men perceive women managers as not having enough confidence to do their job in the workplace. Being nervous in a room full of men used to make it seem as if I was not confident enough to present my views. It's not that I didn't know my job, but I used to become shy and blush easily and I was very self-conscious around men. Though after I had done this three or four times I started gaining the confidence and today I am more than ready to face a room full of men."

The discussion so far has focused on the individual and organisational barriers and individual factors that relate to the participants' rise in the organisational hierarchy. The interviews with the women about their adulthood experiences revealed that the bird cage metaphor was still appropriate to their situation. This led me to think of a way of portraying the linkages between the bird cage metaphors applied to their earlier lives and the corporate cage metaphor that captures the essence of their career experiences.

6.5 CONTINUING THE CAGED BIRD METAPHOR

A bird born in captivity does not know the freedom that it was meant to enjoy, with no ceiling and walls to confine its movement. It only knows the limits set by the cage, and feels comfortable in the confines of the cage. It is not aware of the freedom of birds that fly freely in the wild, whose only canopy is the sky and the only walls the endless horizon. In the previous chapter, I discussed the characteristics of birds in cages and how this metaphor applies to the childhood experiences of the participants.

An analysis of the information gathered during the life story interviews about their adult lives suggests that the caged bird metaphor is still applicable to the women's adulthood and work experiences. The women were raised in their "childhood cage",

which shaped their identities while stifling their growth. Yet they managed to escape from one cage, only to fly into a bigger cage -- the corporate cage. The question then arises whether these Indian women attained complete freedom after they started working, or whether they are still confined by societal, cultural and now organisational pressures? Are they free or are they confronted by organisational bars that will again suppress and oppress them?

After completing university, the women expected that they would at last taste freedom from childhood restrictions and formulate an individual personal identity where the pressure to conform to Indian culture, the family and the community would be reduced. They did not want to be tied down in cages. In their quest for freedom from childhood restrictions and for self-definition, these women entered the world of work, and so another phase of their life journey began.

Upon entering the world of work they found that they had flown into a bigger cage, but a cage nevertheless. I call this the “corporate cage”. This cage posed and continues to pose major challenges to the women and their identities as Indian females. The women had moved out of the insulated environments in which they were raised and had flown into a corporate culture that could aptly be described as a “no Indian woman’s land”. Because of their gender, culture and ethnicity, they did not fit. The organisations the women became a part of are dominated and shaped by racialized and gendered value systems. Because South African workplaces have been historically white- and male-dominated, the cultures of the organisations these women joined continue to reflect values and ways of working that feel comfortable to the dominant group.

Fathers were no longer able to protect the women from the onslaughts experienced from other races, especially males. The “corporate cage” consists of bars, just like their childhood cage, namely restrictions due to apartheid, the Indian community, the family and Indian culture, but includes an additional bar that stems from the organisational culture. The organisational culture bars consist of race and gender inequalities within organisations dominated by white males. In the corporate cage, the women engage in identity work, by struggling to assert and integrate their gender, cultural and professional identities. This is no easy endeavour and clearly

makes identity work difficult for the women. In the next section, I describe the key dynamics and features of the corporate cage.

6.5.1 Intruders

When new birds are placed in a cage, they are not usually welcomed by the birds that occupy the cage already. The resident birds tend to fight for their territories and do not welcome intruders, as they feel threatened and insecure. Likewise, the participants were at first regarded as intruders in the South African corporate workplace. The men they encountered in lower level managerial posts were reluctant to give up their positions of power, but were forced to do so due to employment equity legislation. In an effort to protect their territory, male managers placed many obstacles in the paths of these women on their journey to the top. Saira believes that there are many barriers to women's advancement to top managerial positions:

“There are lots of things to inhibit our advancement. It's the old boys club, it's the networking, it's the relationships and the perception that women are not good enough until they get there and they can prove themselves and women themselves, and I always have this problem, maybe I'm not good enough, maybe this is flukes, this happened by chance. So I think sometimes we are our biggest enemies.”

6.5.2 Perching on mountain tops

To be free from the bounds of the organisational cage, the women have to fly high. The literature uses the glass ceiling as a metaphor for women's being able to see top management positions, while they are unable to reach it, but I feel that the women in the current study who have not reached top managerial positions are trying to reach the summit of a steep mountain. Managers in top positions are like eagles perched on the tops of mountains. Every time the women try to reach the top, the eagles swoop upon them and prevent them from establishing themselves on the mountain tops, as depicted in Figure 6.3.

Figure 6.3: Eagle swooping on smaller bird

Eagle swooping down on bird



Bird trying to escape from eagle's attack

Eagles are territorial and protect their areas from other birds. Other birds are regarded as being a threat and eagles will kill and maim birds who try to perch on their aeries. The women's narratives suggested that managers in top positions protect their positions fiercely, and felt threatened by these women wanting to enter their levels. Bipasha felt that transformation in organisations should be applied more forcefully:

"I think as long as you have your white male barriers at top managerial positions you're going to have that problem of not being promoted. I think South Africa is trying to work through this by trying for certain demographics and certain employment equity strategies, but they have to have more profound audits and structures and penalties in place to get companies to adhere, since we leave the decisions to white males, and multibillion dollar companies like ours are not worried about paying a R250 000 fine. That's probably one person's monthly income. They don't worry about that. You as an Indian female have to be more forceful if you want to get ahead."

The women in the study who had made it into senior management feel that they are not going to progress to top managerial positions in their respective organisations. Most of the women are currently striving to reach top managerial positions within their respective organisations. However, they feel that the rise to top managerial positions is very slow, as legislation is not enforced by external governmental

agencies in corporate South Africa. Preity, for example, aims to move into the top management position:

"The next is a crucial move for me – and the position is that of a Strategic Executive Director (SED). I'll stay long enough in that position to prove I can do the job better than the current SED. I feel the current SED is useless and I can do the job better than her and to prove what I have been saying all this time, that she does not know her job. So my aim is much higher now and that is to move into a top management position, but the process of getting there is very slow, as employment equity is not implemented correctly."

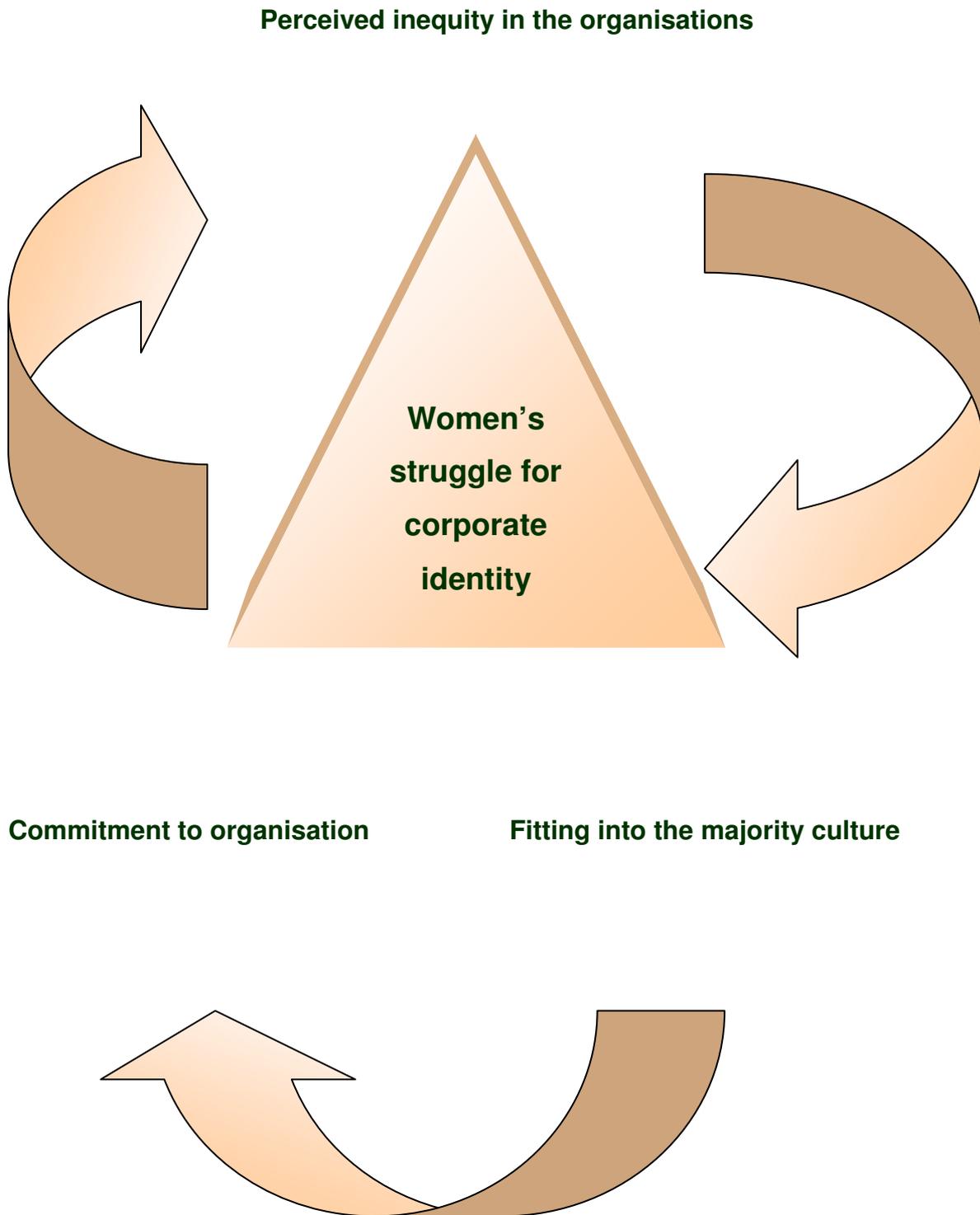
Entering corporate South Africa, the participants' experience of moving into senior and top managerial positions has affected the identities of the women in the study. Certain identities became more salient compared to others in the workplace as the women tried to fit into their respective organisational cultures.

6.6 IDENTITY

In discussing the identity of the women in corporate South Africa, I am interested in the salience of social identities such as gender, professional and racio-ethnic identity. I am also interested in whether professional identity is central for the women, and the role of the above-mentioned identities in the participants' commitment and desire to be part of their respective organisations. I used the concept identity work to understand the social interactions and experiences that raised the questions of "Who am I?", "Who are we?" and "How should I act?" in relation to these women's encounters in the corporate environment. The women in the study are constantly engaged in a process of reworking through their identities, even in senior managerial positions. Identity work is a lifelong process and has not stopped even for these women occupying top managerial positions.

The next section focuses on the struggle of the women to fit into their respective organisations. Figure 6.4 illustrates the inequity and struggles the women encountered in fitting into the corporate environment and the influence it had on their commitment to their respective organisations.

Figure 6.4: Struggle for corporate identity



6.6.1 Perceived inequity in organisations

The majority of women work in organisations that are dominated by white males and where race plays a major role in appointments to top managerial positions. The participants expressed their frustration at not being able to climb the corporate ladder due to race, ethnicity (Indian) and gender (female). Top managerial positions are still dominated by white males who prefer to promote white females who are perceived to subscribe to masculine norms.

The participants have refused to become “one of the boys” and this is evident in their appearance, their language and the artefacts in their offices, which were laden with feminine and cultural connotations. Although the majority of the women interviewed wore trouser suits, costume or real jewellery was almost invariably part of their apparel. The women mentioned they would not wear traditional Indian clothes to work, although they wore such attire at home, because white male managers perceive females who wear traditional clothes at work as submissive and not as management material. The women mentioned that they never swore or screamed at colleagues or lower level employees, as this went against their religious teachings. The artefacts in their offices, such as family pictures on the walls, ornaments on desks, such as a vase depicting an Indian couple, a pen holder in the shape of a mosque, a calendar on a desk with Indian celebrities, were some examples of how the women projected their racio-ethnic identity. Although these artefacts were often small and I initially did not notice them, they were still subtle manifestations of the women’s presence as Indians in the workplace.

6.6.2 Fitting into the majority culture

The participants were unable to integrate into the majority organisational culture. However, the women have undergone acculturation to some extent, in terms of the behaviour they feel is necessary in managerial positions, such as strategic assertiveness, handling older employees and supervisors in a professional manner, working closely with an all-male team and handling conflict in a constructive manner. Integration was difficult to achieve because their religion and Indian culture form part of their core identities. Racio-ethnic identity takes precedence, for example, in terms

of the women's being poor at building social networks within the workplace. The women also refuse to play political games to get ahead in their respective organisations, as such games are seen as unethical in Indian culture and they believe hard work would help them to get ahead. The women do not attend social functions with an all-male group, or flirt with males, as this is regarded as inappropriate behaviour for respectable women. The women would not discuss personal problems, as family reputation takes precedence. They are willing to place their husbands' careers first, as this is the expectation for a respectable wife in Indian culture. The majority of women still live in Indian townships, as they want their children to grow up with Indian cultural and religious values. Indian culture and religion continue to play central roles in their lives.

Although the participants' lives revealed intersectionality, different identities came to the foreground in certain situations. The women's identities are constantly evolving and do not operate in isolation from the context of the workplace and their culture, religion, gender, ethnicity and race. There are situations in the workplace where the women's religious identities become more salient than their professional identities. The women feel cut off from their religion in the workplace, because, since they belong to a minority group, their religious festivals, prayers and dietary requirements are not a priority in the workplace. The women are made to work during their festival days, meetings are often planned during their prayer times, strenuous physical social activities are planned during their fasting period, and in most cases they have to constantly highlight their dietary requirements, as this is not automatically catered for. Waheeda, like the other women, pointed out how she is excluded from social functions due to her religious beliefs:

"I am 'excluded' from corporate social functions due to my religion and culture. For example, I usually get invited for the year end function, but they do not cater halaal. They go to places where no halaal food is served and where there is alcohol. They do not take into account my religious requirements and find it a burden."

The women feel like intruders in a corporate world where they feel unwelcome, like pariahs. The participants felt that the corporate culture still does not accommodate their diverse beliefs, as they are in a minority, and theirs are lone voices fighting

solitary battles. The women feel like in-betweeners and expressed feelings of loneliness, social isolation and powerlessness. Yet, the women refused to be regarded as tokens, although in the majority of cases they were the only Indian females in top managerial positions in their companies. The women felt that they are not welcomed by white males in higher positions, nor are Indian males accepting of them in corporate South Africa. Bipasha, like the other women in the study, highlighted her feelings of isolation in the top management meetings she attends:

“I sit in board and strategic meetings with Chiefs and Executive heads as my peers. I don’t sit in meetings with people at my level so I belong to that grouping and they don’t see it and if I come back to it, it is because I’m an Indian female. For Bosberaad meetings, I’m the only one at an E1 level who gets invited. It’s not only happened here. It’s happened in my previous organisation as well, where you become such a threat that you become isolated. And look, as Indian females we deliver what we have to deliver and we succeed at it. Often you do it at a detriment to yourself because our children, spouses and our health suffer. Because you’re not recognized by anyone as long as you’re giving the output, they don’t recognize you anymore.”

Forming friendships with other females is also a problem for the women due to a lack of trust. The women are also caught in an in-between space where they have a need to maintain their Indian identity and adapt to the corporate culture. However, there is some resistance among the participants to totally integrating with the majority organisational culture, as the women value their cultural values and norms. The tension between their Indian identity and the demands of the corporate culture in their organisations is an on-going struggle and reflects a resilience to survive in a world where they feel marginalised. Resilience also featured as a topic in the discussion on the women’s childhood identity theme.

6.6.3 Commitment to the organisation

Despite the barriers the women encountered, their interviews suggested that they are committed professionals. The women expressed a sense of normative commitment to their professions which stems from their childhood socialization,

where parents instilled in them a sense of loyalty towards employers and friends. In spite of perceiving inequities within their respective organisations and continuously struggling to marry their cultural and corporate identities, I noted a strong sense of loyalty toward their respective organisations. The women are in a constant state of identity work where they redefine and rework their corporate identities without relinquishing their cultural and religious identities. Waheeda, like the other women in the study, pointed out the difficulty of negotiating cultural and corporate identities:

“Where I am at the moment, it’s difficult to get anywhere if you don’t have the contacts. For me, I got the position due to my hard work and although I had to wait longer than other people, I got it on my own merit. They eventually could not deny my hard work and I was producing high quality work as well. They had overlooked me for years, but eventually they couldn’t, because it was becoming too obvious they were discriminating against me.”

6.7 HYBRID IDENTITIES

In working through their professional identities and adapting to the workplace culture, the participants have developed hybrid identities, where they have adopted certain organisational norms and values that led to their upward mobility and that they found acceptable, but at the same time, they maintain their prescribed cultural customs. For example, being assertive is not a value prescribed by the Indian culture for women, but the women have learned to become assertive in order to prove to their supervisors they are capable of handling difficult employees and older workers. This type of behaviour is regarded as acceptable by managers and has led to their career advancement. Shamila aptly summarised the hybrid identity formation the other women also alluded to:

“In order to fit in with male managers, you tend to become more assertive and learn to handle conflict constructively. However, you struggle to advance in the organisation, stemming from the fact you cannot bridge cultural and organisational values and norms, as the Indian culture remains a major part of you. You’re not one of the boys and that is where we struggle because we’re caught in this chasm of

we're not very 'male', neither are we very 'western female' and we're caught in this trap. You can't make it in the male domain because you're not into drinking and golf. So, there is always conflict between who you are as an Indian female and who you are as a professional working in a western corporate culture."

6.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have outlined the individual characteristics which acted as barriers to the participants' advancement, some of which they adjusted or eliminated early in their careers such as becoming assertive, learning to work with males, handling conflict and behaving professionally toward older employees and supervisors. However, these women still find it difficult to network socially, especially with an all-male group, and they do not want to engage in political games and organisational politics to enhance their chances of upward mobility, as such behaviour is considered unethical in Indian culture and religions. The women have followed certain strategies to enhance their chances of climbing the corporate ladder, such as delaying marriage, relocating to pursue job opportunities, developing skills to persuade managers, working on diverse projects in order to make other managers aware of their high levels of competence, and outsourcing domestic chores and child care.

The women shared that organisational barriers restricted their upward mobility, such as male managers undermining their authority and regarding them as incompetent, white males not wanting them in top managerial positions, the women being treated as workplace mules, and organisations not accommodating their religious beliefs. While they found that employment equity works in terms of lower managerial positions, the legislation is not effective at higher levels of management.

In the end, despite the women's efforts to adapt strategies and behaviours to be successful in corporate South Africa, they did not receive the advancement and promotion opportunities they expected, as advancement to top managerial positions is slow. Moreover, organisations were not helpful in advancing the women in their

respective careers. The women believed that advancements in their careers were due to their hard work and high work standards.

The caged bird metaphor was again used in this chapter to illustrate the struggle of the women to escape the organisational cage and perch on mountain tops. The bird cage also depicts their struggle for identity. Their cultural identities remained important to them as women, and their gender identity was influenced by what they perceived it means to be an Indian woman. Within the corporate cage, the women are continuously engaged in reworking their identities as they try to answer the question “Who am I?”

The women’s identities are still heavily influenced by the factors that shaped their early lives – Indian culture and values, gender roles, the family, the Indian community and the apartheid system. Indian culture and religion has remained salient to what they were and are in the workplace. These are parts of themselves that they are not prepared to abandon totally despite their efforts to learn how to be successful managers in their organisations. There is always a tension between cultural identity and corporate identity.

The next chapter presents a discussion of my findings in relation to the literature. In addition, I discuss the ways in which my study brings about new insights into identity work.