

**The enablers and barriers of career progression for women into senior
management positions in the manufacturing industry.**

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Abstract

This study aimed at examining the barriers and enablers which inhibit women's promotions into senior leadership positions, within South Africa's manufacturing sector. The research employed qualitative, exploratory design to gain insights from interviews involving semi-structured interviews of senior female leaders. Structural barriers, like entrenched gender stereotypes, the glass ceiling effect, limited mentorship opportunities and work life imbalance, hindered women's advancement. Supportive leadership practises, effective mentorship and sponsorship, transformational leadership and career resilience, on the other hand, were found to be the critical enablers of progression. Overall, these findings showed how organisational culture combined with societal norms, as well as individual agency, worked together to construct career trajectories. This piece of work contributed to the literature on gendered organisational practises by offering a nuanced understanding, and also included practical recommendations for policymakers and industry leaders to create a more inclusive work environment conducive for equal representation among its ranks at the senior level. Overall, the research pointed out that more systemic change was needed at organisations.

Keywords

Career progression. Enablers. Barriers. Career resilience. Manufacturing sector.

Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

Name & Surname

Date

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Chapter 1 – Introduction to Problem and Purpose

1.1 Introduction

According to Barkhuizen et al. (2022) South African businesses have between 23.5% and 34.5% of their positions in top and senior management occupied by women. This data reveals a gradual improvement in addressing historical gender inequality yet it demonstrates that the evolution of women reaching senior leadership positions is insufficient. In South Africa, women hold a growing but still limited share of senior management roles, despite the country's progressive policies on gender equity. Young women often face higher unemployment rates than young men, exacerbating their challenges in entering and succeeding in the workforce (Stats SA, 2023).

1.2 Problem statement

Women continue to undergo substantial barriers in their career progression. (Moalusi & Jones, 2019), particularly in management and leadership roles within manufacturing industries named 'male-dominated' (Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024). Despite advancements and policy implementations aimed at promoting gender equality in South Africa through the National Development Plan (NDP) through local governments (Stats SA, 2021), South Africa still experiences a gender bias in leadership roles in businesses. According to survey data done by PwC, as men and women move from education into the workforce, their skills are developed and valued differently (Pal et al, 2024). According to Statistics South Africa's (Stats SA) website from 2023, about 35.8% of senior management positions in the private sector are held by women, showing gradual progress but a persistent gap, especially at the top executive levels (Department: Employment and Labour, 2019).

Certain industries, particularly in the mid-market sector, show relatively better representation, with reports indicating women hold 42.0% of senior management positions, a figure that leads on the African continent and outpaces some global regions (Grant Thornton, 2022). However, significant gaps remain, especially in high-level executive roles like CEO, where only 15.0% of roles are held by women among South Africa's top 100 firms listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

Current statistics state that:

- Women occupy 26.5% of top management roles, while men hold 73.5%.

- The representation of women in senior management has improved to 37.2%.
- Women represent 48.2% of professionally qualified positions, indicating a stronger presence at this level compared to top and senior management.
- Over the past two decades, the percentage of women in senior management roles has risen from 19.4% to approximately 42.0% today, showcasing significant progress. This marks a notable increase from previous years, reflecting ongoing efforts to enhance gender diversity in leadership roles.

Following on from this, Figure 1 below displays the active sectors in South Africa, with the demographics of gender and race that occupy employment. This table further highlights the current state with new insights from a demographics (male and female) and sector perspective.

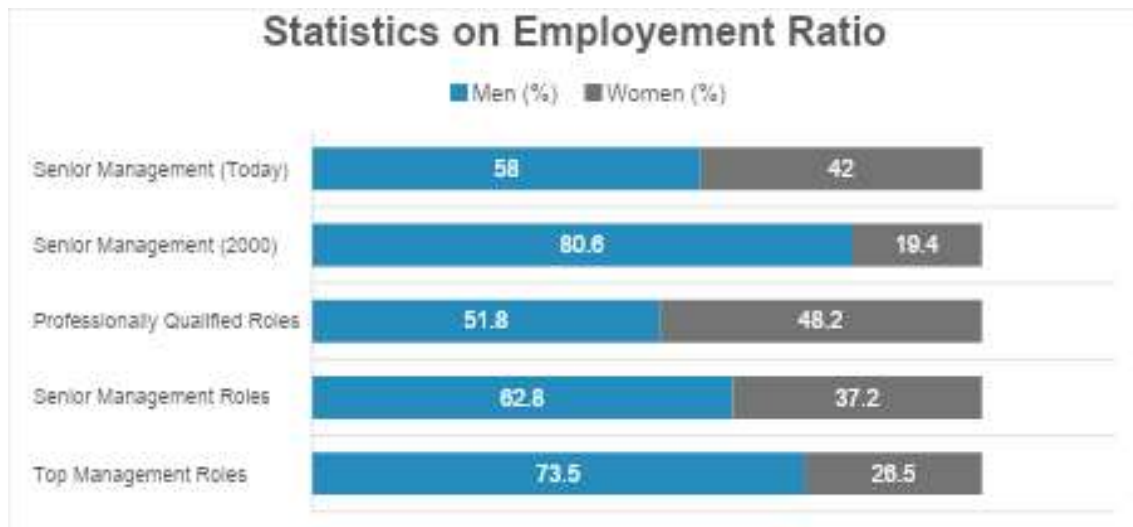


Figure 13: Statistics on employment ratio (Stats SA, 2023)

According to the gender statistics from Stats SA (2023), the Figure 2 (below) illustrates the relationship between education levels and employment rates in South Africa, broken down by gender. It shows the employment rates of men and women across different levels of educational attainment: 'Less than Matric', 'Matric', 'Other Tertiary', and 'Graduates'. A notable observation is that as education level increases, employment rates also rise for both genders. However, there is a persistent gap between male and female employment rates at nearly all educational levels, with men generally having higher employment rates than women, even among graduates.

Education Attainment

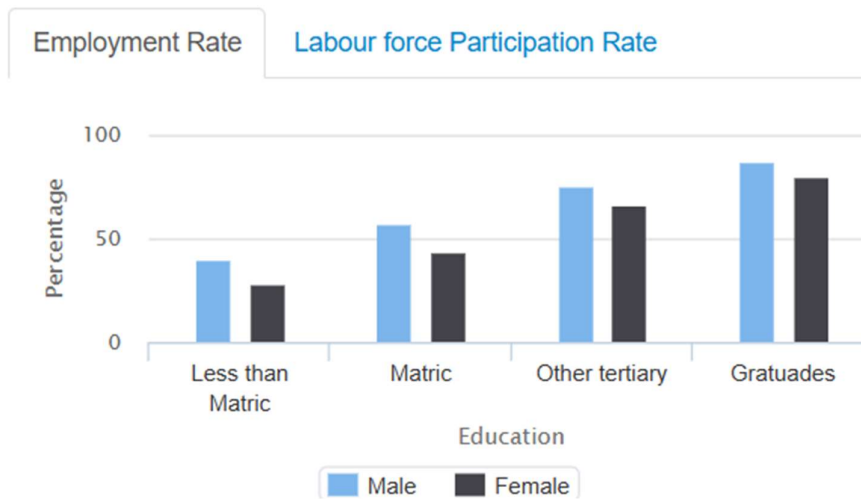


Figure 14: Labour force participation against level of education (Stats SA, 2022)

According to Stats SA (2022), there is an imbalance in the gender distribution in decision-making positions across the different provinces in South Africa as illustrated in Figure 3. This reveals a consistent trend of male dominance in these decision-making roles across all provinces (except in the Western Cape (WC)), with male representation generally exceeding 50.0% in each region. Notably, provinces like Limpopo (LP), Eastern Cape (EC), and North West (NW) show particularly high male representation, suggesting limited female presence in decision-making roles in these areas. Western Cape (WC) appears to have a more balanced gender distribution compared to other provinces, though male representation still surpasses female.

Decision making Positions

Business enterprise

Decision making Positions

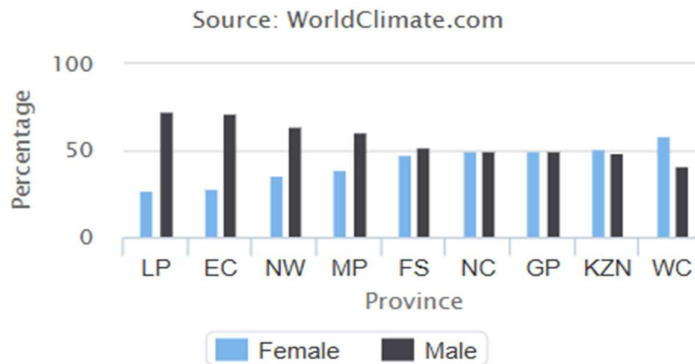


Figure 15: Gender wise stats of Senior Leadership Positions (Stats SA, 2022)

The Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) Strategy 2018–2028 of the African Union (AU) presents a pivotal framework for addressing gender inequalities across the African continent. This multisectoral approach is designed to dismantle systemic barriers hindering women’s empowerment (African Union, 2018), and ultimately career progression and offers a comprehensive blueprint to strengthen women’s agency. The Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) Strategy (2018 – 2028) recognises that sustainable development in Africa is contingent upon gender equality and the positions of women as crucial stakeholders in the region’s socio-economic development in the African context. The GEWE Strategy aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, which seeks to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (UN Women, 2024). SDG 5 advocates for equal participation of women in all levels of decision-making and aims to eliminate all forms of violence, discrimination, and harmful practices that disproportionately affect women (African Union, 2018).

The African Union’s (AU) strategy emphasises legislative reform and adequate funding as essential mechanisms for advancing gender equality. Effective legislative frameworks can dismantle legal and structural barriers to women’s participation, while sufficient financial resources are necessary to support gender-focused programs and initiatives across sectors (Commission for Gender Equality, 2021). The GEWE Strategy seeks to ensure that gender equality objectives are not merely aspirational but are actively realised within

African nations, aligning with global gender equality frameworks. The importance of bringing forth the above information is to bring forth the relevance and business need for this study. Understanding these enablers and barriers will allow organisations and policymakers to create targeted interventions that address specific challenges women face in advancing their careers.

According to the Grant Thornton 2022 report, South Africa's representation of women in senior management roles surpasses global averages, with South African women holding 42.0% of these positions compared to a global average of approximately 19.0% in prior years. This increased representation highlights the country's more progressive approach to gender diversity in business leadership (Grant Thornton, 2022). By 2024, the proportion of female CEOs in South Africa grew from 30.0% to 39.0%, signalling positive momentum toward enhanced female leadership at the highest executive levels. However, while this indicates progress. However, KPMG South Africa produced a report on women leadership in South Africa in 2023 indicating that women occupy only 17.3% of CEO and Chairperson roles combined - an increase from 4.9% in 2004 but still below parity, showing an underrepresented in senior management positions (KPMG South Africa, 2023).

Globally, as of 2024, women in mid-sized businesses hold around 32.4% of senior management positions, which remains lower than South Africa's 42.0% (Guillaume et al., 2017). Over the past two decades, South Africa's female representation in senior management has risen significantly, from 26.0% to 42.0%, while global figures have only seen a modest increase, rising from 19.0% to approximately 33.5% during the same timeframe. This data underscores South Africa's relative strength in gender representation compared to global trends, reflecting the impact of targeted policies and advocacy for gender inclusivity in leadership roles (Grant Thornton, 2022; KPMG, 2023).

These challenges indicate a widespread phenomenon influenced by possible persistent gender stereotypes, as they might influence both perceptions and behaviours within organisational cultures, managerial practices and the overall occupational environment, thereby restricting women's opportunities for advancement. (Fitong Ketchiwou & Van Der Walt, 2023). The distinct challenges women face in the workplace serve as barriers not only to reaching executive positions but also to achieving success in those roles (Babalola et al., 2023) and the real-world problem, therefore, is multifaceted, including the persistence of gender stereotypes in the workplace that diminish the perceived

competence of women in leadership (Moalusi & Jones, 2019). The societal and cultural norms that restrict women's participation and progression in business and the organisational cultures that perpetuate gender biases (Fitong Ketchiwou & Van Der Walt, 2023). These stereotypes are rooted in cognitive biases, social and family upbringing, socio-cultural expectations, and the status quo within organisations, all contributing to a lack of gender diversity in middle to senior management (Avolio et al., 2020; Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

The rationale for this research stems from the observation that, despite the national government's commitment to promoting women in the workplace, the upward mobility of women, particularly into managerial positions, remains slow in South African workplaces. This ongoing challenge highlights the need for continued investigation into the enablers and barriers that women's career advancement. (Fitong Ketchiwou & Van Der Walt, 2023).

1.3 Purpose statement

This research aims to explore the enablers and the barriers that hinder the career progression of women from middle management to senior management roles, ultimately seeks to make a contribution to better female representation in senior leadership. Despite efforts by the Joint Standing Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of Women in South Africa's first post-apartheid parliament to promote awareness of gender-sensitive policy and budgeting, gender-blind approaches to policy-making and budgeting have continued to prevail (Commission for Gender Equality, 2021). By investigating the nuanced ways entrenched gender norms and expectations shape the professional landscape (Babalola et al., 2023), this study seeks to uncover how the enablers and barriers disenable women's progression, potentially leading to the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions within the manufacturing industry. The research was conducted in the manufacturing context in South Africa. Through this analysis, insights will be gained into the enablers and barriers (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

Systemic changes are required to achieve female senior leadership representation in the workplace, highlighting the pivotal role of organisations, and policy-making applications. (Moalusi & Jones, 2019), to challenge the barriers of career progression and adopt enablers that would increase the capabilities of women to be fairly and equitably

represented in senior management roles in the manufacturing sector. This study identifies these enablers and barriers that women face in attaining senior management positions (Bishu & Headley, 2020). Thus, challenging patriarchal norms, the findings seek to promote an inclusive leadership culture that drives change in perspective and innovation (Naidoo et al., 2024).

The theoretical need for the study is based on Social Role Theory, developed by Eagly and Wood (1991), which explains how societal expectations and stereotypes shape behaviour, leading to gendered perceptions of leadership (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). In many contexts, men are seen as more aligned with assertiveness and competitiveness, traits traditionally associated with leadership, while women are often stereotyped as more nurturing and communal. These biases contribute to a “think manager, think male” mentality (Schein, 1973, pp. 33–34), which can discourage or limit women’s career progression into leadership roles.

Despite policy initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in South Africa, women continue to face significant challenges in ascending to senior leadership positions. Structural barriers, such as limited access to professional networks and mentorship opportunities, impede a women’s career progression. The ‘broken rung’ phenomenon, where women are excluded from crucial early career advancements, further exacerbates this issue, hindering their ascent to senior leadership roles (Shongwe, 2019).

Additionally, persistent gender stereotypes contribute to the underrepresentation of women in executive roles as agreed by Vyas-Doorgapersad (2023). Societal norms often typecast men as assertive and decisive leaders, while perceiving women as nurturing but less capable of leading. These biases shape organisational expectations, leading to a double standard where women’s leadership abilities are undervalued (Heilman, 2001). This disparity affects women’s confidence, contributes to stress, and perpetuates an unequal organisational culture that impacts team dynamics and overall health (Mathur-Helm, 2005). Examining women’s career progression within the context of these theories helps identify the structural, cultural, and social barriers women face; revealing strategies to overcome them.

Limited evidence exists on the barriers contributing to women's underrepresentation in science across various cultures, countries, and scientific fields, underscored by the need for further research on this topic (Avolio et al., 2020).

1.4 The South African context

In the South African context, the persistence of gender inequalities, despite government policies that prohibit discrimination, mandate equality, and support women, can be better understood by examining the 'invisible' barriers women face along their career paths (Moalusi & Jones, 2019). Additionally, there is a lack of emphasis on skills development as a key factor in career advancement (Fitong Ketchiwou & Van Der Walt, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to assess what impacts women's career progression and to explore how certain personal barriers (family responsibilities, motherhood, pregnancy, marriage) may impact their career advancement (Babalola et al., 2023).

Table 4: Demographic percentages of employees in different sectors (Commission for Gender Equality, 2021)

| Sectors | Male | | | | Female | | | | Foreign National | | Total |
|---|---------|----------|--------|-------|---------|----------|--------|-------|------------------|--------|--------|
| | African | Coloured | Indian | White | African | Coloured | Indian | White | Male | Female | |
| Agriculture | 15.8% | 3.0% | 2.0% | 57.0% | 6.5% | 1.6% | 1.0% | 12.0% | 0.8% | 0.2% | 100.0% |
| Mining and Quarrying | 16.3% | 2.2% | 2.5% | 63.4% | 3.5% | 0.3% | 0.9% | 8.4% | 2.4% | 0.3% | 100.0% |
| Manufacturing | 7.3% | 4.9% | 8.4% | 55.6% | 3.2% | 1.9% | 2.6% | 13.0% | 2.8% | 0.4% | 100.0% |
| Electricity, Gas and Water | 24.3% | 4.9% | 8.1% | 34.1% | 12.3% | 2.5% | 2.5% | 9.2% | 1.7% | 0.2% | 100.0% |
| Construction | 12.2% | 4.6% | 4.6% | 61.7% | 4.4% | 0.8% | 1.3% | 7.2% | 3.1% | 0.1% | 100.0% |
| Retail and Motor Trade/Repair Service | 8.0% | 6.4% | 7.6% | 46.5% | 3.6% | 4.4% | 3.2% | 19.1% | 1.0% | 0.3% | 100.0% |
| Wholesale Trade/ Commercial Agents/ Allied Services | 9.7% | 4.2% | 11.5% | 45.0% | 4.2% | 2.6% | 3.1% | 18.1% | 1.4% | 0.2% | 100.0% |
| Catering/ Accommodation/ other trade | 18.1% | 5.0% | 4.4% | 32.9% | 8.8% | 3.8% | 2.2% | 22.1% | 2.0% | 0.7% | 100.0% |
| Transport/ Storage/ Communications | 13.6% | 5.1% | 9.7% | 43.0% | 6.5% | 2.4% | 3.0% | 14.5% | 1.7% | 0.4% | 100.0% |
| Finance/Business Services | 9.9% | 4.0% | 7.3% | 42.4% | 6.0% | 2.4% | 3.8% | 20.6% | 2.6% | 0.9% | 100.0% |
| Community/Social/ Personal Services | 31.2% | 5.3% | 4.5% | 22.1% | 17.4% | 2.7% | 2.7% | 12.8% | 0.8% | 0.3% | 100.0% |

In the Table 1 it is interesting to note that women are significantly underrepresented in senior management roles within the manufacturing sector, particularly African, Coloured, and Indian women, with the majority of senior roles occupied by White males 55.6%. African females make up only 3.2% of senior management in manufacturing, while White females hold 2.6%, emphasising a gender and racial gap. Compared to other sectors,

such as retail (where females have marginally better representation), manufacturing stands out for its male-dominated senior management structure (Commission for Employment Equity, 2022; Stats SA, 2023). This suggests unique barriers within the manufacturing sector. This data presented in Table 1 highlights the need to explore the systemic and structural barriers preventing women from advancing into senior management within manufacturing. It also highlights the importance of developing enablers addressing gender and racial imbalances, ensuring equitable career progression opportunities for all underrepresented groups.

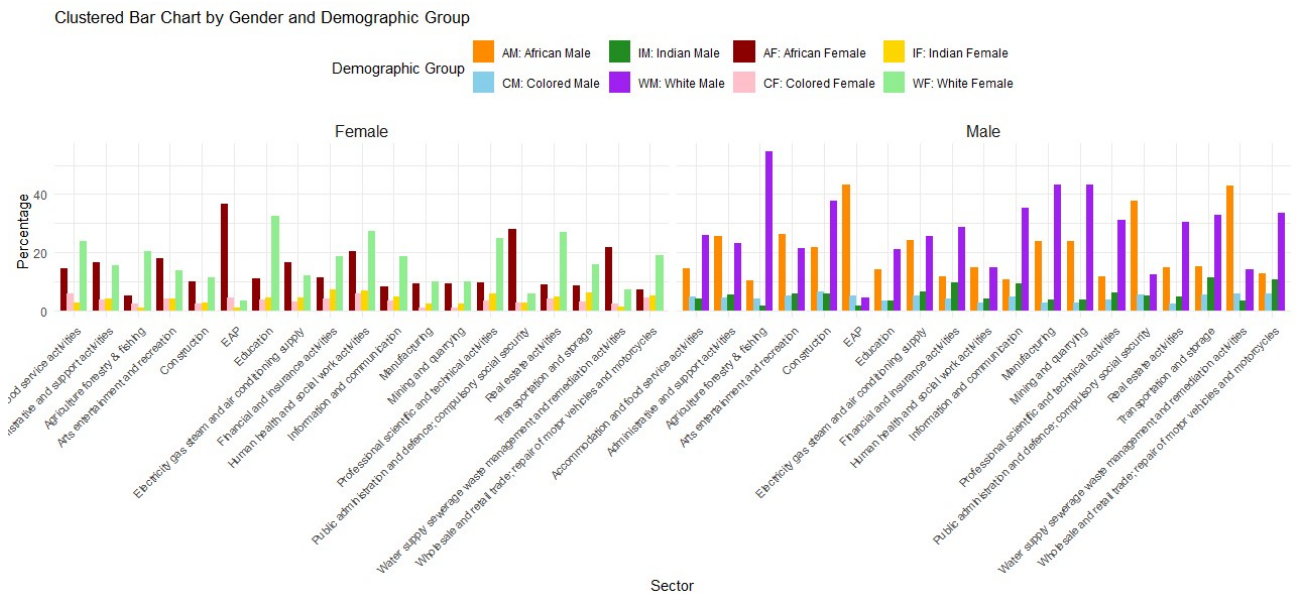


Figure 16: Demographic percentages of employees in different sectors (Visualized) (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023)

The manufacturing sector shows a clear dominance of males in senior management, with White males (WM) representing 39.3%, followed by African males (AM) at 11.5%, and Indian males (IM) at 10.2%. Collectively, men occupy a significant majority of senior management roles, indicating systemic gender imbalances. The 'official unemployment rate' then climbed to 32.9%, while the labour force participation rate was at 59.4% (Stats SA, 2023).

Figure 5 (below) compares the top management positions in South Africa between 2012 to 2023.

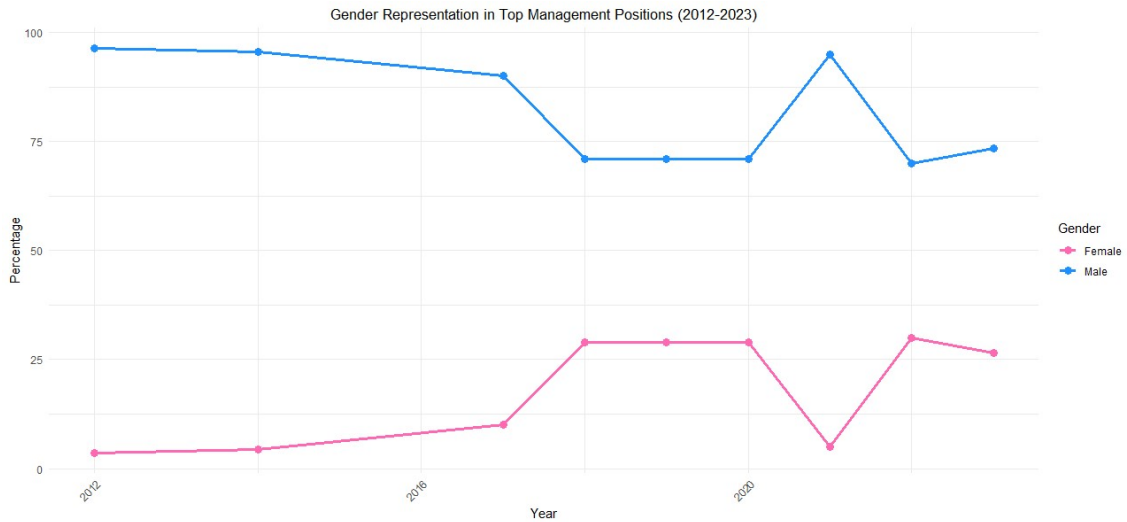


Figure 17: Gender representation in top management positions in South Africa from 2012-2023

The line chart from Figure 5 illustrates that male representation consistently dominates throughout this period, while female representation shows a gradual upward trend, rising from 3.6% in 2012 to 26.5% in 2023. Significant growth occurred between 2014 and 2018, reflecting progress driven by gender equity initiatives, but the trend stagnated from 2018 to 2020 at 29.0%. A sharp decline to 5.0% in 2021 indicates potential setbacks, likely influenced by external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic. The recovery to 30.0% in 2022 and slight stabilisation at 26.5% in 2023 highlight ongoing progress but underscore the need for sustained efforts to close the gender gap in leadership.

The representation of women in senior management within manufacturing has improved across all racial demographics, with the most significant increase among African and White females. However, the growth remains incremental and insufficient to achieve parity with male counterparts. African women experienced the most notable increase, but their representation (6.6%) still lags far behind that of African males (11.5%) and White males. White females have seen relatively faster progress compared to other female groups. Despite small gains, the manufacturing sector remains a challenging environment for female career progression, with persistent underrepresentation of women across racial demographics.

1.5 Conclusion

In this study, career progression will be defined using established scholarly definitions. Following this, evidence from the literature review is presented on the enablers and barriers to the advancement of women to senior management positions in male-dominated industries within the South African context. After reviewing the literature, there will be details about the proposed research methodology and design, concluding with the referenced articles. The document will outline the timeline of the research process and sample questionnaire for the interviews that will occur.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review examines the factors that influence women's career progression, particularly in the South African manufacturing sector. This chapter focuses on identifying the enablers and barriers that affect women's advancement from middle management to senior leadership roles. The review of the literature considers socio-cultural norms, organisational structures, and policy frameworks; highlighting how these elements shape career advancement as key constructs. It also explores key themes such as career resilience, mentorship, leadership styles, and workplace practices, emphasising their role in either supporting or hindering women's progression. Addressing gaps in existing research and discussing strategies for promoting gender equality, this review provides a basis for understanding the underrepresentation of women in leadership and suggests directions for future research and practical interventions.

2.2 Career progression

Career progression is a journey within a specific field, shaped by an individual's work experience and goals, ultimately leading to professional growth (Moalusi & Jones, 2019). It includes both horizontal and vertical career moves, allowing individuals to gain diverse skills and experiences. Transitioning from a middle management role to a senior leadership position comes with greater responsibilities and higher company benefits (Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024). Scholars have done much research to understand the consequences of inequality in the workplace, what are the appropriate actions that need to take place, and identify policies to be implemented to advance the equality of women (Belingheri et al., 2021; Shrestha et al., 2023).

Adopting a 'one size fits all' approach to policy-making often disregards the unique concerns of various political constituencies, including women, children, and individuals with disabilities (Commission for Gender Equality, 2021). Studies on gender stereotype threats have not investigated the circumstances and conditions that influence its effect on female and minority leaders, as well as the situations that can lessen its detrimental effects on individuals' career progression (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). The mere underrepresentation of women in top organisational roles does not necessarily prove the existence of a glass ceiling; this disparity might be due to women in the accounting

profession being more likely to leave employment to raise a family (Cohen et al., 2020). Alternatively, whether to pursue other fields of interest, e.g., entrepreneurship. Findings suggest that while women are encouraged to pursue further education to advance into managerial roles, Mouton et al. (2023) argues that higher educational attainment does not necessarily provide them with an advantage in securing senior or leadership positions.

In the South African manufacturing sector, this issue is especially salient, as historical racial and gender inequalities serve to inhibit women's advancement into leadership roles. Research was conducted by Deya and April (2023) on factors affecting marginalisation of women in the manufacturing industry of South Africa in senior leadership. Although Black Africans account for the largest share of paying work in South Africa (44.0% of working men and 36.0% of working women), they take up only 11.0% of senior management positions of working men and 6.0% of positions of working women (Commission for Employment Equity, 2022). Yet 56.4% of the top management roles held by men and 10.3% held by women are White and only 9.0% of the workforce. The origin of these is rooted in deep seated apartheid era barriers; which continue to block diversity and inclusion. In addition, the significant numbers of White people in positions of leadership has a negative impact on the career growth of marginalised groups and the workplace's values and decisions. The segregation of the manufacturing industry is due to several social and industry factors. According to Commission for Employment Equity (2022), social factors include how children especially girls are socialised, and the difference in education and skills of both men and women. Organisational factors, could lead to discrimination in recruitment and promotion, organisation's willingness to transform, the '*Old Boys Club*', the belief that women need to be monitored, that they are perceived to be 'emotionally immature', and that salaries for men and women were unequal. They visualize their findings in tabular form as follows:

Table 5: Factors influencing the marginalisation and discrimination of women (Syster et al., 2023)

| Marginalisation and discrimination of All Women | Social Factors | Organisation/Industry Factors |
|--|------------------------------------|--|
| | 1. Socialisation | 3. Type of work |
| | 2. Education and skill differences | 4. Discrimination in recruitment and promotion |
| | | 5. Organisation's willingness to transform |
| | | 6. White male dominance (Old Boys Club) |
| | | 7. Women need to be 'monitored' |
| | | 8. Women are 'emotionally immature' |
| | | 9. Salary discrepancy |

Another study focusing on the factors that influence the marginalised treatment of women in leadership positions was conducted by Martin and Barnard (2013). They point out that women in these environments encounter a different set of challenges that include pervasive gender biases and work-family conflict, which too often derail their career paths. South Africa's historical challenges related to discrimination continue to perpetuate significant disparities, both along racial and gender lines (Pillay-Naidoo & Vermeulen, 2023). The work-family conflict highlighted in this study, which could be an important factor, was overlooked by the research by Deya and April (2023). However, they highlighted certain factors such as White male dominance (Old Boys Club) that could significantly explain the discrimination against the women in senior leadership positions in the South African manufacturing industry.

Multiple studies have been conducted to explore the factors that enable (enablers) or disable (barriers) the career progression to senior leadership positions. One particular study conducted by Sheridan et al. (2023) on women in c-suite positions focused on what enables them to reach senior management positions. Sheridan et al. (2023) identified 4 key enablers that contributed to the career progression of women toward senior leadership. These factors included:

- I. Support systems.
- II. Learning systems.
- III. Career advancement systems.
- IV. Advocacy.

Support systems such as family, leaders, mentors, and faith contributed in encouraging women to progress in their careers. Advocacy proved to be helpful to them by connecting them to key decision-makers through sponsorships and career sheltering assisting them to progress in their careers. The learning opportunities such as leadership programs and stretch assignments helped them in grooming and enhanced their readiness. Career advancement systems, on the other hand, involved strategic decisions and sacrifices to utilise the opportunities (Sheridan et al., 2023).

However, despite the increasing number of the women getting educated and increased emphasis on SDGs especially SDG 5, the data shows, women are still underrepresented in senior executive positions as well as the boardroom. In the corporate sector, women occupy about only 26.5% of top management roles. In their study, Jogulu & Franken (2023) reported similar findings. They suggest capable and qualified women continue to be underrepresented in senior management positions, especially in non-Western countries, and face difficulties in establishing long-term job security and steady career progression, as their career paths tend to be complex, fragmented, and non-linear.

The underrepresentation of women is not limited to the manufacturing industry. A study conducted by Keyes et al. (2022) focuses on the distribution of women in journal publications in environmental medicine. These authors noted that “women are underrepresented across all roles in science publishing”. Talking about leading roles in academia, they noted that women are seriously underrepresented in editorial roles in journals. The underrepresentation of women is particularly pronounced in research roles that carry significant influence and authority. Below is a figure developed from the findings of Keyes et al. (2022).

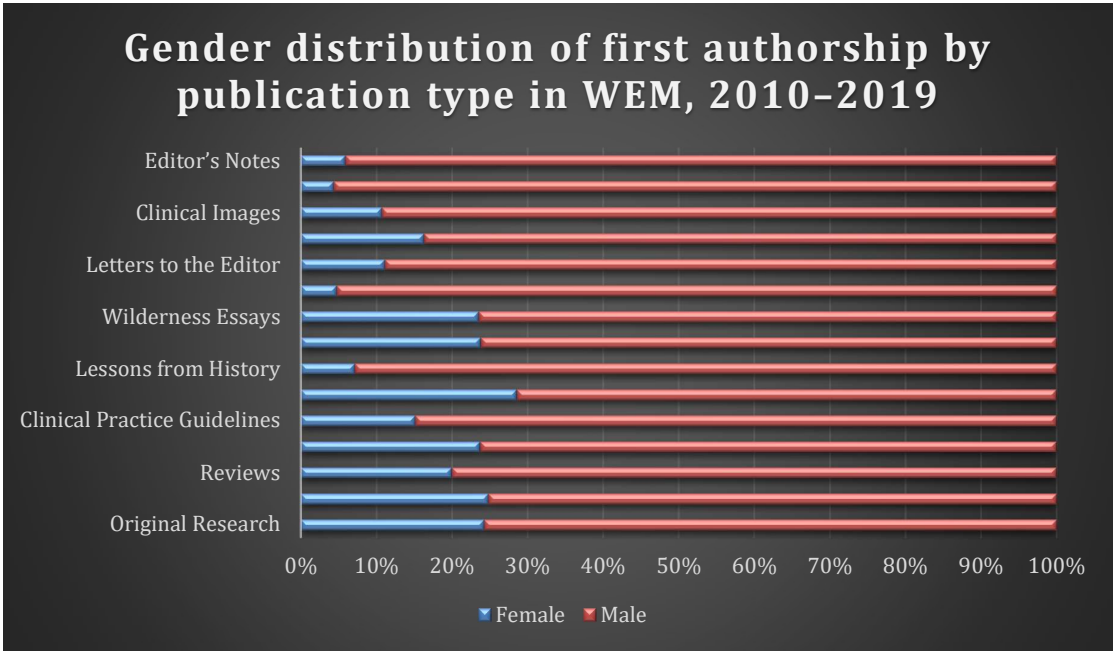


Figure 18: Gender distribution of first authorship by publication type in WEM, 2010–2019 (Keyes et al., 2022)

Keyes et al. (2022) also studied the characteristics of the reviewers of journal articles in environmental medicine publications. Figure 7 quantifies their findings on the distribution of the genders based on the characters.

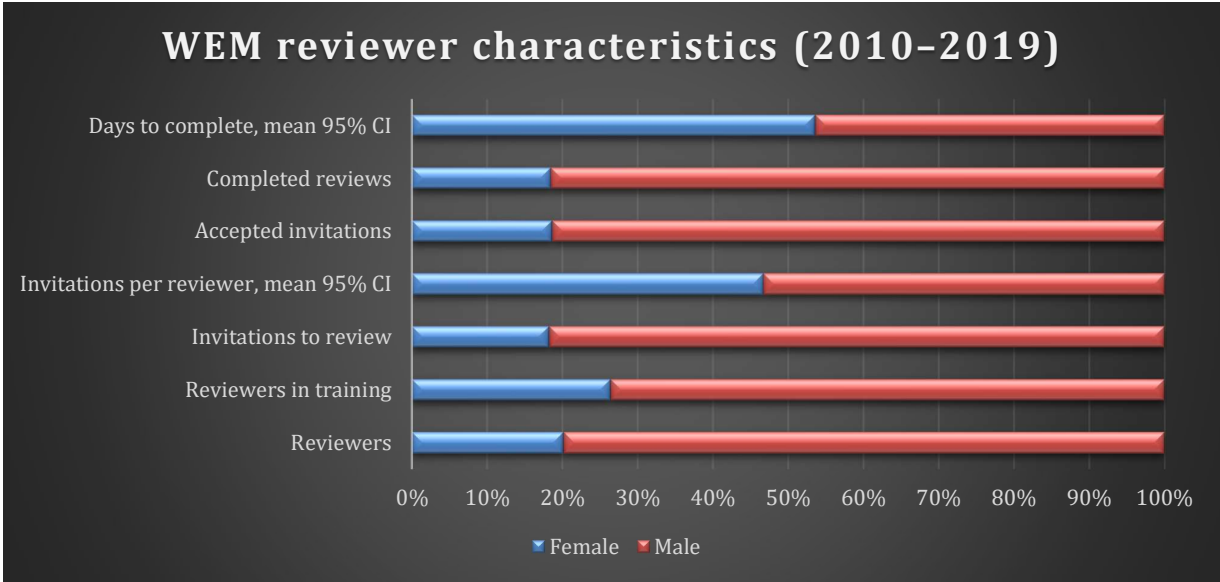


Figure 19: WEM reviewer characteristics (2010–2019) (Keyes et al., 2022)

A similar study was conducted by Avolio et al. (2020) focusing on the careers of women in science. These authors studied the literature on the subject of underrepresentation of the women publishing in high-impact journals. From the literature, they observed that women are seriously underrepresented in the science field. They identified certain potential reasons that could explain this underrepresentation. They broadly categorised the factors into:

- I. Individual.
- II. Family.
- III. Educational.
- IV. Social.
- V. Labour-economic.

The combination of biological differences alongside personality traits and self-efficacy beliefs together with attitudes toward science determines individual outcomes. Among the multiple factors that influence career selection, one can find both family-based variables like parental support and educational attainment and gendered stereotypical influences on professional choices.

Avolio et al. (2020) further maintain that the underrepresentation of women in scientific fields results from social factors including the unification of cultural beliefs and the mismatch between scientific roles and exclusionary 'chilly environment' rules in scientific communities as well as racial barriers. Through education, women face three important barriers to science involvement that include biased educational methods and expectations about academic achievement in addition to occupational stereotyping. Labour-economic factors worsen the gender disparity in scientific disciplines through career information shortages occupational segregation and pay distribution inequalities that reduce women's scientific achievements and participation.

The instances from the academia and social sciences illustrate that the disparity between the genders is not exclusive to the manufacturing industry. The representation of women in leading roles tends to appear scarce in general. However, the observation of Avolio et al. (2020) on factors that influence this trend is fairly detailed, if overlapping. They presented certain factors that are potential contributors but are not discussed in the preview.

For this research, literature insights include articles on Malaysian and UK women working in the IT industry, accounting professions, and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in Africa to provide a worldwide view and draw on the current themes for the South African context from the mining sectors. Through the literature insights, the conceptual framework on the career enablers was developed which includes: women's career resilience (Jogulu & Franken, 2023), career role models for other women within the manufacturing sector (Barkhuizen et al., 2022), organisations that encourage self-development and career development tools (Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024). The literature then informs the inhibitors, namely gendered organisations (Moalusi & Jones, 2019), the 'glass ceiling' (Shrestha et al., 2023), and popular gender stereotypes (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

2.3 Enablers of career progression

According to research conducted by Rosener (2011) on how women's leadership impacts the workplace. They found that a greater representation of women in leadership roles can enhance positive self-perceptions of career advancement and increase self-confidence within themselves in their abilities within male-dominated environments (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Rocha and van Praag, (2020) studied factors that might resist a woman's progression in c-suite positions. They propose that the role congruity and stereotype threat theories, propose that the underrepresentation of women in male-dominated roles is partly due to women's lower identification with stereotypically masculine occupations and a lack of confidence in their abilities and potential for success. The relevance of women seeing other women at senior levels, play an important part as mentors. This is especially important through career paths such as STEM and the presence of role models in science appears to influence women's career choices (Avolio et al., 2020; Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

According to a study conducted by Jogulu and Franken (2023) focusing on Malaysian and Australian women, resilience enables individuals to advance in their careers, equipping them with the ability to overcome obstacles, demonstrated through core behaviours like network leveraging, learning, and adaptability, which are crucial for career growth, and sustaining well-being during challenges. Recent research suggests Generation Z gender groups prefer transformational and feminine leadership qualities over more traditional masculine styles; denoting that the visibility of female leaders would be essential for

empowering other senior women role models to cultivate their personal and managerial identities (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

2.3.1 Mentorship and sponsorship

Mentorship and sponsorship are key elements that promote women's career progression to roles of senior leadership. Bahrami et al. (2023) state that mentorship supplies fundamental guidance, emotional aid, and role modelling to women, which helps them beat the organisational barriers and learn leadership skills. Sponsorship — advocacy for and active promotion of women's careers by senior leaders — is also a major career accelerator. Both developmental opportunities and visibility are offered by sponsorship, both of which are required for senior leadership advancement. Senior leaders' advocacy for women fulfils critical opportunities and resources for women, leading to their rise in executive positions, as sources suggest (Bahrami et al., 2023).

2.3.2 Work-life balance integration

In particular, work-life integration policies are of paramount importance in retaining women in executive roles, especially in high-stakes jobs that require more than a full day's work and time. Kossek and Lautsch (2018) underscore the significance of flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and childcare support for women to strike a balance between their professional and personal responsibilities. These policies increase job satisfaction, decrease stress, improve work-life balance, and in doing so promote resilience among women executives. They also mention that companies that have these policies in practice enjoy higher rates of retaining women in leadership positions, therefore, work-life integration is a key aspect in keeping women's careers in executive leadership.

2.3.4 Transformational leadership

An exploratory study on barriers and enablers for career enhancement by Maheshwari and Nayak (2022) suggests that one of the important enablers of career resilience for women in senior leadership roles is the adoption of transformational leadership styles. They go on to argue that transformational leadership (inspiring and motivating teams to move towards a common goal) has a powerful impact on changing an organisation's norms. Transformational leaders can challenge traditional leadership models that are not

beneficial for men and women, and make those environments inclusive to help men and women alike. Women leaders who model transformational styles foster cultural transformation while at the same time improving organisational performance. This type of leadership approach nurtures gender diversity and resilience in women led organisations because it helps create an environment where women will not be fearful to continue in their roles despite the challenges they may face (Kark & Shamir, 2002).

Career development is taken as an enabler of women's career advancement when organisations provide resource-based development opportunities (Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024). Career development is a critical enabler for advancing women into senior leadership roles by equipping them with essential skills, mentorship, and networking opportunities. Structured programs help women acquire the strategic and decision-making competencies necessary for executive leadership. Mentorship and sponsorship provide guidance and advocacy, while networking builds professional relationships that open doors to new opportunities. Haegele and Maher (2023) highlight that addressing gender disparities in leadership requires making leadership roles more appealing to women, as they are less likely to pursue early-career promotions, underlining the importance of inclusive career development strategies.

2.3.5 Career resilience

Women resilience offers women access to resources that allow them to face gender biases, organisational politics, and work-life integration problems, and also ensures continuity in career progression and leadership (Parker, 2023; TeamWomen, 2022). In this context, several key attributes underpin career resilience such as adaptability, emotional intelligence, perseverance, and strategic networking. In fast-changing industrial landscapes, adaptability, that is, the ability to respond quickly to changing organisational dynamics and external change, is particularly critical (Her New Standard, 2022). An increase in emotional intelligence innovates interpersonal relations and promotes teamwork and a collaborative work environment, which is essential for keeping a team together and for communication (Women's Leadership Today, 2022). The other trait is perseverance – the ability to keep pushing on toward a long-term goal even in the face of setbacks, or even when systemic challenges that exist in male-dominated industries, present themselves: (Parker, 2023). Strategic networking enables women to access or

increase mentorship, resources, and opportunities to advance their careers and to grow resilience against structural obstacles (Netwomen, 2022).

Emotional intelligence facilitates styles of leadership that are more inclusive and empathetic, to match the trend for more diverse work environments (Women's Leadership Today, 2022). Just like that, adaptability and strategic networking are so integral in playing organisational politics and hierarchy if a leader wants to be making right decisions considering their own goals and organisational goals (Her New Standard, 2022). Taken together, these competencies serve as a solid base for women leaders who not only survive but thrive at senior levels in a typically male-dominated environment.

Career resilience for women in senior management positions is formed from mentoring and sponsorship, leadership development in inclusive organisational environments, transformational leadership styles and supportive work-life integration policies. Through these enablers, the system is created to make women thrive in executive roles despite the systemic barriers; and advance in long-term leadership roles.

2.3.6 Education

Education is considered one of the key enablers in the career progression of women in increasing their participation in the labour market and their progression toward senior leadership roles. A study on the role of factors that influence the contribution of women to their industry (higher education in this case) was conducted by Lavanya and Ahmed (2018). They maintained that education and training could help women to be better prepared for challenges and increase readiness to avail the opportunities. They added that education provided to women should be aimed at equipping them to be prepared for novel challenges they might face in workplace in leadership positions. Alongside, the more the women choose to opt for diverse educational fields, more they will be equipped to occupy senior leadership positions in diverse fields. Talking about the barriers to women progressing to a senior leadership positions, they maintained that there is a lack of women seeking leadership positions due to the limited opportunity for a healthy work-life balance.

When one views gender equality as the fifth Sustainable Development goal to enhance economic productivity for women, the gender pay gap shows men still earning more than

women, which can be demotivating and seen as an inhibitor to equal representation in the workplace (Belingeri et al., 2021; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

2.4 Barriers to career progression

Research on the barriers women face in leadership reveals that even after achieving leadership roles, they often supervise fewer subordinates, manage less financial responsibility than their male counterparts, and face formal manifestations of inadequate representation and unfair treatment in the workforce (Bishu & Headley, 2020). The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles has often been attributed to family-related decisions. However, this prevailing perspective is challenged by studies that highlight other significant contributing barriers. These include limited job flexibility, the prevalence of male-dominated networks or 'boys clubs', and the scarcity of suitable role models (Jogulu & Franken, 2023).

2.4.1 Gendered organisations

This brings in the theory of gendered organisations which Bishu & Headley (2020) and Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, (2023) agree that where systemic structures and practices inherently favour men, creates an environment where career, economic, and social opportunities are predominantly accessible to men. These organisations 'perform gender' by visibly aligning task allocation, interpersonal relationships, and workplace interactions along gender lines (Kenny & Donnelly, 2020). This often relegates women to less influential roles, confined to less prestigious job roles that are stereotypically considered feminine (Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2023). In such settings, men typically dominate decision-making processes and control organisational resources, reinforcing a power imbalance that perpetuates masculine advantages and limits opportunities for women to progress (Bishu & Headley, 2020). Organisational practices influenced by gender stereotypes affect the evaluation and promotion processes, creating a disadvantage for women in male-dominated industries towards selection for middle management to senior management positions (Netnou & Strydom., 2020).

2.4.2 Glass ceiling

The argument brought in by Kenny & Donnelly (2020) and Cohen et al. (2020) is that a structural factor that can influence decisions on whether to stay in a profession is

influenced by the issue of promotions being subjected to bias according to the employee's gender, commonly referred to as the 'glass ceiling'. The glass ceiling can be experienced at different levels of a career, and suggest that women often face challenges in breaking through the glass ceiling as they quit mid-career (Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2023). Studies show that women in senior ranked positions are rare even if it is within their ambitions, and there are many aspects linked to the phenomenon (Shrestha et al., 2023). Additionally, the 'glass cliff' phenomenon, where women are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions during organisational crises, exposes them to heightened risks of failure and increased scrutiny (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Most often, these systemic challenges lead to women being excluded from senior leadership roles, even if they are very good leaders.

2.4.3 Gender stereotyping

According to Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, (2023) women are often concentrated in specific technical fields within the sector that are perceived as having lower status and are associated with traditionally 'feminine' traits, such as product design, aesthetics, user experience, marketing, and administrative roles. This links to the gender stereotyping that still exists in organisations even though it has improved from previous years (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Stereotypes are from families, based on gendered beliefs, expectations, and even professional career models (Avolio et al., 2020), then act as a barrier to the career advancement of women into senior leadership positions. Gender role stereotypes also still affect how leadership capabilities are perceived. Booyesen and Nkomo (2010) reason that such management stereotypes have predominantly defined these features as reserved for men and thus, work at excluding women from occupying executive positions. Women in this sector face challenges of marginalisation from necessary leadership pathways in manufacturing, as traditional attitudes contesting women's capabilities continue within the manufacturing sector (Martin & Barnard, 2013). Gender role expectations and society norms play a big part in hindering women to advance in their career. The decision-making and executive performance of women are both adversely affected by stereotype threats, which are threats that their social group will affirm negative stereotypes about them (Kenny & Donnelly, 2020).

Further restricting women's ability to exhibit leadership characteristics are expectations that women in positions of leadership mould themselves into traditional, male leadership

styles. In addition to this, women experience gender-based discrimination and lack of access to mentorship that hinders their professional growth and movement up the career ladder (Schmidt 2009).

When going through the literature, it was found that there are cultural and societal norms embedded within individuals, i.e.: older individuals tend to hold more traditional views on gender roles and exhibit stronger biases against female employees, and in contrast, younger individuals are generally more supportive of gender equality, believing that men and women should have equal opportunities both in the workplace and at home (Halliday et al., 2021). A study was conducted by Low et al. (2023) analyses AI-based bias detection in gender, race, and income among Gen-Z. The study found that the younger generation may help in closing the gender gap and breaking the stereotypes around gender. However, it also highlighted that gender biases still persist among the younger generation. The key findings of the study Gen-Z's AI based gender bias detection suggested that:

- I. Younger generation is progressing towards inclusive use of vocabulary such as the words “strong”, and “Powerful” are being associated with both the genders.
- II. Words that were associated with females alone are less prevalent in Gen-Z lingo. However, the male participants tended to describe females based on physical appearance (eg. long hair, attractive). While males tended to describe themselves on the basis of personality traits instead, hinting the prevalence of bias.

Similarly, research conducted by Peng et al. (2024) on gender equality and green development reported that the gender gap was found to be smaller among young adults than among their older counterparts. They further suggested, that the younger generation can use digital tool to spread awareness against gender stereotypes and biases thereby improving inclusivity in workplace and at home. The findings of this research partially align with those of the Low et al (2023).

2.5 Politics and organisational exclusion

Male-dominated networks and the ‘boys club’ culture prevalent in many organisations also play a central role in excluding women from leadership opportunities. Women's exclusion to powerful networks and their inability to participate in decision-making processes needed for moving up the executive ladder is as a result of these exclusionary practises (Kenny & Donnelly, 2020). Eagly & Karau. (2002) conducted research on organisational responsibilities that organisations assign to women and their male counterparts. They

highlighted that women serve in many senior leadership positions with limited financial and operational responsibilities. Also, women are subject to biases in hiring and promotion decisions and have to carry extra family responsibilities which also complicate their career progression (Financial Times, 2023). Rahim et al. (2018) conducted a study on the barriers that limit the career progression of women to top positions in organisations. They observed that the organisational politics and structural exclusion prevent women from being able to demonstrate their abilities and reach to the peak of the leadership ladder.

2.6 Comparison to similar 3rd world countries

According to research conducted by the Global Government Forum in 2022 South Africa has experienced substantial advancement in senior civil service gender representation reaching 48.6%. South Africa has achieved substantial gender equality in leadership that ranks it as one of the top G20 countries in civil service gender representation. The results show South Africa's proactive gender quota system combined with its leadership development programs drive its high level of success. India together with Indonesia have demonstrated slow progression because their senior civil service roles continue to show minimal gain in female participants. The public sector leadership opportunities remain limited for women in India because the nation maintains only 20.0% female involvement even though cultural traditions create significant barriers for women in executive positions. Indonesia battles with structural impediments stemming from gender preferences and institutional obstacles which block women's advancement toward top managerial positions.

Women's corporate board membership globally shows South Africa leading the way with 29.0% female representatives which outpaces the global standard of 19.7% (Deloitte, 2022). South Africa shows a strong dedication to boosting diversity among its corporate leadership stakeholders. Organisations in South Africa which prioritise diversity through their initiatives experience superior performance from both financial results and innovation outputs. Unlike other countries Brazil and Mexico show low percentages of female representation on boards which came in at 11.5% and 6.5%. Cultural and structural barriers continue to affect Latin America because traditional gender norms still shape corporate leadership mechanisms across the region. Brazil and Mexico face a double disadvantage because both countries suffer from a lack of mentorship support and sponsorship availability for women which in turn expands the boardroom gender gap.

South Africa achieved number 23 in worldwide rankings and a 21.9% business owner rate for women according to the Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs (2020). Research indicates that moving forward the number of established female entrepreneurs is rising in South Africa due to public sector support combined with financial accessibility schemes. Slower growth rates among women entrepreneurs exist in countries including India and Indonesia despite their challenge to access business capital and navigate social barriers and institutional shortcomings. Scientific studies attribute South Africa's high ranking to its developing regulatory systems that stimulate female business participation using funding initiatives and tax incentives. Business success in South Africa benefits from its entrepreneurial ecosystem which provides women entrepreneurs with access to important networking platforms and valuable mentorship opportunities. The outcomes for female entrepreneurs in India and Indonesia differ from South Africa as these countries' present cultural obstacles alongside weak underpinning infrastructure which blocks their entrepreneurial potential.

Research shows that South Africa leads multiple African, Asian and Latin American countries by advancing women's participation in manufacturing leadership roles. South Africa's achievements with gender equality leadership prompt other developing countries that seek comparable advancement in their leadership parity efforts. Inactive policies regarding mentorship along with financial inclusion initiatives and leadership development programs show evidence of raising career resilience for women within senior leadership roles (Netnou & Strydom, 2020).

2.7 South African manufacturing context

The manufacturing sector in South Africa contributes 13.0% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and plays an important role in its economy (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2024). It is also important to acknowledge South Africa's deeply racialized history, coupled with a strong patriarchal culture, both of which have significantly contributed to the persistent racial and gender inequalities evident today (Commission for Gender Equality, 2021; Mouton et al., 2023). In a study conducted by Syster et al., (2023) it was revealed that cultural traits rooted in patriarchy, along with socio-historical factors such as prejudice and discrimination stemming from South Africa's apartheid era, continue to hinder the progression of women. Patriarchal traditions and societal norms, including early marriage

and childbirth, remain widespread and restrict women's economic involvement (Asadullah et al., 2024). Women represent a critical demographic in policy considerations, accounting for 52.0% of the population (Commission for Gender Equality, 2021), manufacturing companies should prioritise investing in robust staff networking, leadership development programs, and targeted training initiatives to empower women and unlock their leadership potential (Mouton et al., 2023).

2.8 Theoretical gaps about women's career progression

Over the past few decades, research on gender equality has made significant strides, with a consistent rise in publications that cover both well-established topics, such as women's roles in education and the workforce, as well as emerging areas of interest (Belingeri et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is insufficient evidence regarding the barriers influencing women's underrepresentation in science across various cultures, countries, scientific fields, and life stages, highlights the need for more research on this subject (Avolio et al., 2020).

During the literature review on Google Scholar, there was predominantly less literature on South African women in the manufacturing sector, compared to the other sectors mentioned in the previous section (Lusithi, 2023). Statistics show that women continue to face barriers to career advancement in organisations, and more work needs to be done in South African organisations (Moalusi & Jones, 2019). In the context of career advancement, is a uniquely experienced phenomenon shaped by individual context, personal background, values, and the economic and social structures of societies, yet it remains under-researched from culturally and contextually nuanced perspectives (Jogulu & Franken, 2023). However, there is a significantly smaller body of research focused on discussing or presenting effective strategies to address and overcome gender biases in the workplace (Belingeri et al., 2021).

There is a notable gap in research on female entrepreneurship, particularly in areas such as education, personality traits, governance, management practices, and leadership approaches and further exploration of these aspects could provide valuable insights (Belingeri et al., 2021).

Jogulu & Franken, (2023) mention that career progression is shaped by individual context, personal background, values, and the economic and social structures of societies, yet it remains under-researched from culturally and contextually nuanced perspectives. Research exploring the intersection of corporate governance, career advancement, compensation, female empowerment, and women’s experiences highlight the importance of intersectionality, as factors such as race, class, and the perspectives of other minority groups significantly influence outcomes (Belingheri et al., 2021; Moalusi & Jones, 2019). Investigating whether certain governance structures are more effective in promoting diversity and inclusion (Belingheri et al., 2021) presents an opportunity for qualitative analysis, shedding light on societal evolution and its implications for the future of management (Naidoo et al., 2024). Hence there is a need to research the enablers and barriers of women's career progression into senior positions in the manufacturing sector in South Africa.

2.9 Conceptual framework

According to Imenda (2014), conceptual frameworks differ from theoretical frameworks because they synthesize various concepts and perspectives to provide a broader understanding of a research problem. The below conceptual framework was built by the author using the below previous scholarly articles drawn from synthesising literature to bring forth the focus for the purposes of the what research questions to adopt. The authors are mentioned under each enabler and barrier mentioned in the literature review.

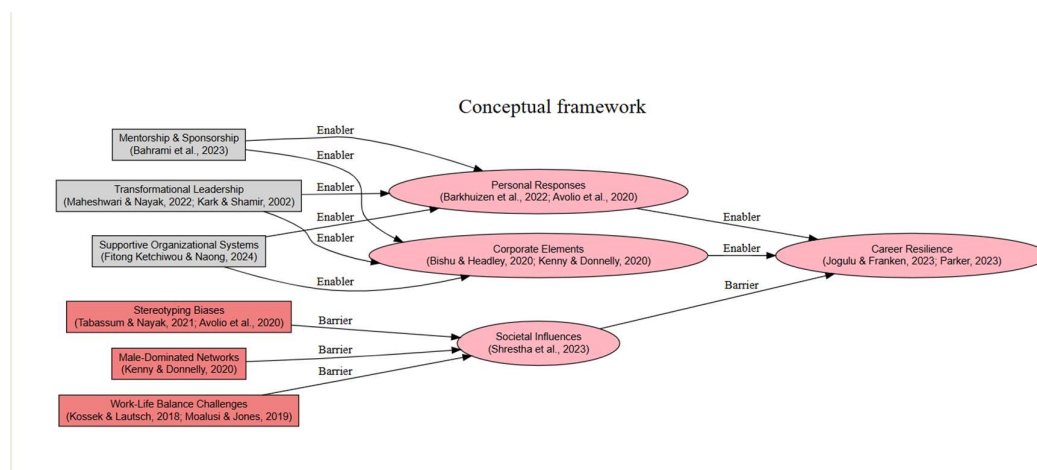


Figure 20: Conceptual Framework (Author’s own)

The career resilience displayed by women executives within the manufacturing industry depends on intricate interactions between personal responses corporate elements and societal influences. Quietly conquering structural obstacles while sustaining their professional development forms career resilience among women as defined by Parker (2023) and TeamWomen (2022). Industrial jobs remain mostly understaffed by women because these positions face three main obstacles including stereotyping biases male-dominated networking circles and complications in balancing work and personal life (Moalusi & Jones, 2019; Shrestha et al., 2023). The analysis of underlying factors behind career resilience development will help to better understand gender representation at the highest leadership positions and guide possible actions to enhance gender representation.

Career resilience finds its essential enablers through mentorship and sponsorship combined with transformational leadership and supportive organisational systems. Through mentorship, women gain professional networking advantages and hierarchical visibility together with emotional and directional support (Bahrami et al., 2023). Transformational leadership traits which encompass inspirational behaviour, motivational skills, and dedicated inclusion help women break conventions about leadership while building workplace environments that honour diversity (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022). The implementation of company-wide flexible work policies alongside leadership development initiatives and targeted career progression plans creates essential structures necessary for women to increase their career resilience when reaching senior positions (Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024).

Women in the manufacturing sector encounter substantial hurdles that limit their chance to develop career resilience. Organisations with gendered cultural structures that contain an unintentional preference for male leadership end up potentially blocking women's participation in important decision-making processes (Bishu & Headley, 2020). Women face two major obstacles in their professional development: the 'glass ceiling' blocking their ascent up organisational ranks while the 'glass cliff' creates dangerous leadership roles during company crises (Shrestha et al., 2023). The pressure to keep up with traditional gender role expectations alongside family duties serves as barriers that prevent women from maximally engaging with leadership opportunities (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

This research adopts Role Congruity Theory alongside Career Resilience Theory and Social Role Theory as conceptual foundations to examine both traditional leadership prejudices against women in authority (Rocha & van Praag, 2020) and the survival strategies that individuals utilise in difficult work situations (Jogulu & Franken, 2023). This research explores theoretical frameworks to discover essential components that drive career resilience among female senior manufacturing leaders.

The developed framework establishes a systematic method to explore manufacturing women's career resilience through analysis of progress enablers and development barriers. Driven by identification needs specific sequential interventions including mentorship programs along with inclusive workplace strategies and leadership development schemes to build an environment that enhances women's resilience for senior leadership advancement.

2.10 Conclusion

The literature reviewed demonstrated the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior positions across various industries, including manufacturing, science, IT, and academia. Despite progress in education and global efforts to promote gender equality through initiatives like SDG 5, women continued to face barriers such as the gender pay gap, stereotypes, and structural challenges like the "glass ceiling." The literature review indicated that women's career progression was often nonlinear and hindered by systemic areas within the organisation.

However, studies also identified key enablers that supported women's career advancement, including career resilience, mentorship, and organizations that actively promoted self-development and leadership opportunities. The presence of female role models in leadership positions was found to boost career confidence and encourage more women to pursue executive roles. In the next chapter we will propose 3 research questions, with the objective and rationale to understand what enablers and barriers exist and the strategies women professionals need to undertake so they can advance into senior management positions

Chapter 3 – Research Questions/ Propositions/ Hypotheses

3.1 Introduction

Women face continuous challenges when attempting to access senior management positions in South Africa's manufacturing industry. Such inequity demonstrates both continuing social discrimination along with missed opportunities for business leadership through untapped talent. Knowledge of barriers and enablers on women's leadership progression forms indispensable foundation for developing successful equality-promoting strategies. The research questions of this study find their basis in the literature while this chapter outlines both the guiding questions and their proposed objectives.

3.2 Research questions and objectives

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What enablers enhance women's progression from middle management to senior management positions within the manufacturing industry?

Objective:

- Investigate the mechanisms enabling women's transition from middle management into senior management within manufacturing organisations.

Rationale: The understanding of enabling factors is crucial to create specific support systems which will help women advance to senior management positions. Studies show three important factors which help women advance their careers include supportive organisations together with mentor programs and workplace inclusion. Moalusi and Jones (2019) discovered through research that mentors combined with supportive leaders form essential components behind women's advancing careers in South Africa's manufacturing sector. The study by Modisenyane (2023) found that manufacturing executives see mentorship together with networking functions as primary factors for women's advancement in their careers. Research within the South African manufacturing setting investigates relevant enablers to create executive guidelines that promote female leadership diversity in organisational structures.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do women overcome barriers to advance their careers through the manufacturing sector's middle management into senior leadership roles?

Objective:

- Identify and analyse obstacles that stop women from becoming senior leaders through middle management positions in manufacturing companies.

Rationale: To create effective solutions for reducing career obstacles experienced by women researchers who must first understand these limiting factors. Professional research shows several obstacles block women from reaching senior management roles because of organisational culture and work-life balance difficulties coupled with gender discrimination. According to Moalusi and Jones (2019) the South African manufacturing sector faces two notable barriers that impede women's careers: gender biases together with insufficient mentor assistance. According to Modisenyane (2023), the combination of work-life balance problems and minimal networking connections binds women back in their professional advancement in manufacturing sector. The research analyses these obstacles in the South African manufacturing sector to understand how women specifically encounter these challenges and develop solutions for their resolution.

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What steps do female professionals need to take to use their career resilience against barriers toward achieving career advancement in manufacturing?

Objective:

- To identify enablers and barriers for women to advance their careers through the manufacturing sector.
- To recommend effective strategies and recommendations to assist in suitable policy-making.

Rationale: The study of women's ability to build career resilience for barrier transcendence while pursuing enablers proves essential for developing individual and organisational support structures advanced for female careers. Research findings show career resilience stands as an essential component for women's professional development since it enables them to handle career transformations together with adversity. According to Moalusi and Jones (2019), resilience stands as a vital force for dealing with obstacles in manufacturing settings. This research investigates career resilience practices used by South African manufacturing sector women to deliver concrete suggestions that enhance women's senior management representation.

3.3 Conclusion

The examination of enablers and barriers to women's career advancement in South African manufacturing needs direct investigation through these research questions that prioritise career resilience effects. This research examines gender diversity in leadership by uncovering enabling factors and barriers which seek to advance knowledge while developing proven strategies for senior management women advancement.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents research design, philosophical underpinnings, methodological approach and specific strategies that influenced the investigation of the enablers and barriers of women's career progression in the South African manufacturing sector. The methodological choices were aimed at enabling a thorough examination of women's lived experiences as well as nuanced interactions of women working in male dominated environments. The research was exploratory and the research design was qualitative to obtain rich, contextual data to validate or refine existing theories and to establish a framework for future research.

4.2 Purpose of the research design

The research design was modelled as an exploratory study to validate and revise the current concepts and theories on the women's career progression in the manufacturing sector. To that end, it was investigated whether the enablers and barriers previously found to affect career advancement of women continued to affect it in contemporary settings. Adopting a design as exploratory, the study aimed at revealing latent themes and deepening the insights to serve as the basis for potential future research. The design and methodology took inspiration from the works of Saunders and Lewis (2018) suggesting that an explorative study should not only prove the existing theories but also learn the subtle details and the context specific dynamics that were not known yet.

4.3 Philosophical underpinnings

An interpretivist philosophy underpinned the research which concerned examining social phenomena within their real-world settings. The choice of interpretivism is based on it fitting the intention of gaining an understanding of the intricacies of the workplace dynamics and the subjective experiences of women in leadership. Such an approach recognised that career trajectories were determined by individual experiences, organisational culture and societal norms. The research focuses on how enablers and barriers to female participation in the manufacturing industry were perceived by those working within the industry, and how these factors are embedded in context of the gendered organisational practices (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). By virtue of this philosophical position, the research tended to rely on rich and detailed details captured

from the participant accounts focussing away from the deeper minute aspects of gender bias, mentorship and career resilience. This approach allowed for a deep exploration of individual experiences since career journeys are personal experience (Moalusi & Jones, 2019), organisational cultures, and societal norms that shape the professional landscape for women's career advancement.

4.4 Approach selected

This study used an inductive approach that seemed more appropriate for investigating a somewhat under-explored phenomenon in a given context (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The testing of theory preceded data collection so the analysis was informed by the rich and detailed data achieved through semi-structured interviews. The study was for phenomenological design which is a qualitative approach aimed to understand the lived experiences of people. This approach facilitated the systematic investigation of the applicability of the theoretical propositions concerning enablers and barriers to South African manufacturing. Barkhuizen et al. (2022) outline that the phenomenological approach was a structured way to explain how various factors impacted career progression and to empirically show the themes that emerged from the interviews.

4.5 Strategy

The strategy used for the collection of data from a purposively selected sample of participants was a semi-structured interview. An interview guide was developed on the basis of identifying organisational culture, leadership support, role of mentorship, gender dynamics and work-life balance. This interview guide accommodated follow-up questions, questions that seek to probe and gather comments to deeper explore individual experiences. A number of the women employed in the manufacturing sector who were in senior management positions were interviewed, along with Talent Managers, Training Managers and Leadership Development Managers. Seeking out these additional perspectives allowed the insights to be gathered on the strategies employed to boost women's career progression and the organisational initiatives that facilitate or obstruct these strategies. This approach guaranteed that the enablers as well as the disablers were identified and that actionable recommendations could be drafted.

4.6 Time horizon

The research design was a cross-sectional observational design, which gave a picture of the current status of women career advancement in the manufacturing sector. All the data was collected during a given period so that the findings captured the participants' experiences during the period. To abide with the time bound nature of the project as well as the need to analyse data of a representative portion of a population at some given point in time, this design was selected (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). This cross-sectional approach allowed for the possibility of testing the relationship between enablers and barriers without the complication that comes with the process of longitudinal data collection.

4.7 Proposed research methodology

The qualitative research design was adopted and a constructivist approach was followed. As a way to explore women's subjective experiences and interpretations of being in male dominated roles, this methodology was chosen. It analysed how career enablers and disablers impacted women's advancement from middle management to senior levels of leadership. The goal was to give an empirical account of the factors that promoted or challenged career advancement within the lived experiences of participants. In accordance with the suggestion by Bishu and Headley (2020), the study seeks to illuminate the perspectives of women who knew first-hand what it was like to be in an organisation whose voice is solely male. Consequently, the exploratory nature of the research permitted a probe into the details of how women continue to face challenges that hinder their access to leadership positions and how interventions could be implemented to promote gender equality in leadership roles.

4.8 Population and unit of analysis

The study population comprised of the professionals employed in the South African manufacturing industry (Avolio et al., 2020). The researcher narrowed their focus to organisations that were representative of the sector and that had very large gender imbalances in senior leader roles. The unit of analysis was women at senior levels of management with more than 5 reportees. The deciding factor for this choice was that they mainly wanted to know the factors influencing their career trajectory, biases they experienced, and progression opportunities. Further, insights were generated from Engineers, Plant managers, Human Resource Managers, as well as Leadership Development Managers involved in executing women's strategies and having the ability

to influence organisational policies pertaining to career development. This approach offered a more complete picture of what was driving women's under representation in senior leadership roles in systemic ways.

4.9 Sampling method and size

Participants for the research were purposively sampled in order to provide detailed and diverse perspectives on the topic of research. Participants had to have at least two years' experience at senior management level in the manufacturing industry with more 5 reportees.

The method for sampling was intended to realise diversity in terms of race, role, and organisational function. These participants were not the only participants: Attempts were also made to conduct interviews with Talent Managers, Leadership Development Managers, and Training Managers in order to hear a larger view of efforts to promote women's career progression. These roles were included to shed light on the organisational strategies which supported or constrained female leaders but not all were available at the time of the request for interviews. According to Saunders and Lewis (2018), a sample is a subset of a larger population. Given the qualitative nature of this study, a sample size of approximately 15 participants was selected. This number was deemed sufficient to capture diverse perspectives while remaining manageable for an in-depth exploration of each participant's experiences, ensuring that no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). However, the final sample size was adjusted to 12 participants based on the richness of the data collected as no new themes were emerging and reached saturation as shown in Figure 13. The participants were women with a minimum of 2 years of experience in the manufacturing sector, ensuring they possessed adequate knowledge and insight into organisational dynamics. Additionally, they were drawn from different provinces in South Africa to reflect a broad range of experiences and perspectives (Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024).

4.10 Measurement instrument

The semi-structured interview guide used semi-open and closed-ended questions which was the primary instrument used to measure. The guide aimed to investigate places like organisational culture, leadership backing, access to mentorship, gender equations, work-life balance and certain situations that either facilitated or inhibited career progression.

Literature (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Saunders & Lewis, 2018) was followed in the development of the questions and a pilot study was conducted with two women in the senior leadership positions to refine the questions in the interview guide. The pilot study allowed to use the feedback in terms of the clarity and relevance of the questions to modify the interview questions and protocol before the full data collection phase. As stated, the utilisation of the semi-structured format ensured a consistency in the data collection while simultaneously allowing the flexibility of the respondents to be elaborate about their experiences.

4.11 Data gathering process

The analysis of the data was collected through semi-structured interviews followed a thematic analysis approach (Moalusi & Jones, 2019). Ethical clearance to conduct the study was granted by the University of Pretoria GIBS Ethics Research Committee. All confirmed interviewees provided their demographic details, including their gender, race, and current positions within their respective organisations. Data collection was achieved using a series of semi-structured interviews that took place either in person or virtually using a virtual medium Teams or Zoom depending on participants availability and preference. The interview would be with the camera on if the participant was comfortable with this, as a way to improve engagement, allowing for the analysis of their reactions as they respond to the questions prompted. The recorded narratives from each interview were saved in a folder, transcribed verbatim, with the permission of the participants. The transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software, for the purpose of the thematic analysis. Transcripts were then coded and data categorised using NVivo 11 and emerging codes and themes visualised. This entire process was conducted under a rigorous protocol to capture all the relevant details and to make sure that the analysis captured the subtlety of the experiences of the participants. Data collection occurred within a particular period, enabling the cross-sectional design to report the account of the shape of enablers and barriers in the manufacturing sector.

4.12 Analysis approach

Thematic analysis which is a method suitable for exploratory research was used for the analysis of the qualitative data. The transcribed interviews were systematically coded through the use of NVivo 11. Several stages had to be followed in order to conduct the analysis:

1. **Familiarisation:** The familiarisation stages of reviewers therefore included reading transcripts several times to sufficiently understand the data.
2. **Coding:** The data were coded by means of NVivo 11 and the recurring ideas, phrases and concepts pertaining to enablers and disablers of career progression were identified.
3. **Grouping:** These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories, in which they shared similarities with and patterns.
4. **Iterative refinement of categories:** The categories were recursively refined into distinct themes that were representative of the underlying issues. The mapping tools in NVivo were then used to visualise these themes to identify relationships and intersections between different codes.
5. **Synthesis:** Themes were analysed with respect to the research questions and findings were synthesised into a coherent narrative that explained the enabling factors to career progression and also the barriers that prevent career progression.

All data interpretations and conclusions were thus all presented as reflections on an analysis of the specified material and indeed the thematic analysis was conducted entirely in past tense.

4.13 Quality controls

To ensure rigor and reliability of research findings, multiple quality control measures were used. Second, a meticulously crafted interview guide was instituted, pilot tested, and refined to ensure that questions were asked well and that this process did not bias our sample. In the process, the interview guide was sent to selected participants in advance to enable them to familiarise themselves with the questions and the focus of the interviews. This practice had mitigated any misunderstanding and made sure things were as candid and reflective as possible.

The study strictly followed all ethical protocols. All participants were approached and informed consent was taken from them, clarifying that participation was completely voluntary, and in case anyone wanted to leave, they could do so at any time. All transcripts were stored on a password protected computer and pseudonyms were used in both reporting of findings. Ethical clearance for all data collection and analysis techniques was

obtained from the University of Pretoria GIBS Ethics Research Committees so as to ensure that all data collection and analysis were according to the high standards of ethics.

Additionally, NVivo 11 was utilised to enhance the reliability and validity of findings as it provided a systematic coding and categorisation of the data. In addition, to minimise subjectivity and to verify the consistency of interpretation of themes, regular cross checking of codes between multiple researchers was performed. The triangulation of these coding practices played a lot in establishing the credibility of the findings. The reliability and validity of the measurement instrument were critical to ensure that the data collected accurately reflected the phenomena being studied and that the research findings were credible and generalisable (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

4.14 Limitations

However, several limitations were acknowledged in spite of the rigorous methodological design. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured interviews, which gave depth and flexibility, though with the inherent risk of interviewer bias. It was possible that the phrasing of questions, or the interviewer's tone, had an effect on the responses of the participants. This was also tried to be minimized by trying to standardise the interview protocol and by repeatedly emphasising the need for honest responses.

A limitation also was the subjective nature of qualitative analysis. The researcher's code based on NVivo 11 allowed systematic coding, but interpretation of themes was determined through the researcher's judgment and could be inconsistent. Moreover, since this design was cross-sectional, it only showed a picture of the happening at one time but did not enable analysis of any changes or trends that were occurring with time. Last, the sample was limited in size and comprised only one industry, which might limit the ability to generalise the findings to other industries or circumstances.

The respondents might be in a location that would not be comfortable enough to fully engage and might be disturbed by the office environment and cannot fully engage. Time constraints were a challenge as some interviewees rescheduled because they were busy with other matters that were of greater priority, which delayed the data collection process ultimately leading to looking for other suitable participants as they would sometimes become unavailable after such delays.

4.15 Conclusion

Methodology applied in this study was aimed at offering a detailed and context specific understanding of the enablers and barriers to women's career progression in the South African manufacturing sector. The adopted approach was exploratory, qualitative, based on interpretivist and constructivist paradigms. This research used semi-structured interview as a method of gathering rich, descriptive data from the purposively selected sample of the managerial population; however, they included the perspectives of Talent Managers, Training Managers and Leadership Development Managers.

The data collection process took place cross-sectionally, and the transcripts were systematically analysed using NVivo 11 for thematic analysis. Familiarisation, initial coding; categorisation; theme development were the steps involved in the analysis of the data collected. A major effort was made, however, to implement quality control measures to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings given the inherent limitations of qualitative research.

It was expected that the findings from this study would provide such insights on the factors, which encouraged or impeded women's career progression, as a basis for actionable recommendations for increasing gender equality in leadership positions in manufacturing organisations. Having a methodological approach and rigorous analysis shown to be of utmost importance to understanding the lived experiences of women in male dominated industries which in turn become a foundation for developing future interventions and research in this critical area of inquiry.

Chapter 5: Findings and Results

5.1 Introduction

The findings presented in this chapter were collected from a series of online interviews, which explore career progression of females in senior management positions in the manufacturing sector. The objective was to analyse what factors help progressing a career as a leader, what workplace challenges they face and what organisational dynamics shape their career trajectory.

The data collected from the online interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo (QSR International, 2013) as a qualitative data analysis tool, to identify recurring themes and patterns. The results are presented objectively with no interpretation or reference to the existing literature but rather focusing on the insights discussed by the participants. Finally, the chapter follows the major themes identified in the data regarding perspectives on leadership experiences, workplace barriers, and career growth opportunities within the sector.

The following sections reproduce some of the key findings drawn from the interviews and provide an empirical basis for further discussion and analysis in subsequent chapters.

Table 6: Demographics of the participants

| Interviewees | Role | Race | Sector |
|----------------|---|----------|---------------|
| Participant 1 | Supply Chain Manager | White | Manufacturing |
| Participant 2 | Chief information officer | White | Manufacturing |
| Participant 3 | Safety & Plant Manager | Black | Manufacturing |
| Participant 4 | Plant Manager | White | Manufacturing |
| Participant 5 | Principal Engineer | Coloured | Manufacturing |
| Participant 6 | Financial Director | Black | Manufacturing |
| Participant 7 | Plant Manager | Black | Manufacturing |
| Participant 8 | Operations Manager | Black | Manufacturing |
| Participant 9 | Operations Plant Manager | Indian | Manufacturing |
| Participant 10 | Human Resources Manager | Black | Manufacturing |
| Participant 11 | Managing Director | Black | Manufacturing |
| Participant 12 | Franchise Operations and Supply Chain Manager | Black | Manufacturing |

The demographics show 12 interviewees from the manufacturing sector, representing diverse leadership roles ranging from operational management to senior executive positions. The majority of participants (7) are Black, followed by (3) White, (1) Indian, and (1) Coloured, illustrating varied racial backgrounds and unique responsibilities in senior manufacturing organisational levels. The sample was biased because the intention was to have more than 2 women in each race to get a proper understanding of how their responses might be different or aligned.

5.2 Key themes identified from the interviews

Table 4: Themes across different positions

| | Chief Information Officer | Principal Engineer | Financial Director (CC) | Supply Chain Manager | HR Manager | Plant Manager | Managing Direct | Operations Manager | Senior Manager | Franchise Operations | Plant Manager | Safety & Plant Manager | Operations Plant |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Breaking gender bias | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 1 | |
| Delayed promotion | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Diversity and inclusion in leadership | 2 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | |
| Education access | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | |
| Empathetic leadership | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Financial responsibility | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Lack of diversity quotas | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Lack of leadership programs | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 0 | |
| Lack of recognition | 1 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | |
| Leadership advocacy in | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| career advancement | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Motherhood and career stagnation | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| People-first leadership | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Stereotypical leadership | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Support for women's career progression | 2 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Willingness to progress | 1 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| Work-life balance | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| Workplace conflict | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Workplace stress | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Senior women executives working in South African manufacturing businesses shared through the interviews important gender-linked barriers and facilitators affecting their professional advancement. The researcher analysed significant aspects regarding the elimination of gender biases, delayed progressions and diversity practices, work-life integration and additional elements affecting women's upward movement to executive positions. High-ranking professionals holding positions of Chief Information Officer, Principal Engineer, Financial Director, Supply Chain Manager, HR Manager, Plant Manager, Managing Director, Operations Manager and Senior Managers from throughout various functions participated in the research. These professional groups operate independently to shape the discourse about gender-prejudices and leadership advancement and occupation slowdowns.

5.3 Trends across leadership positions

The recognition of breaking gender bias demonstrates different levels across leadership positions, although HR Managers along with Operations Managers and Plant Managers show the highest awareness of this issue. The participants in these roles experience direct

exposure to gender-related workplace interaction because they manage teams along with organisational policies. Financial Directors and Managing Directors display less interest in this issue compared to other leadership positions indicating gender bias gets less attention at the top strategic levels. The issue of delayed promotion mostly affects Senior Managers in Franchise Operations and Financial Directors as well as Supply Chain Managers. Higher-level executive teams demonstrate minimal presence of gender-based discrimination which implies that such barriers mainly affect middle management rather than executive roles. Plants managers together with chief information officers and supply chain managers display moderate levels of recognition towards diversity and inclusion. Multiple managerial levels must continue enhancing their inclusive leadership approaches despite acknowledging the importance of these practices.

5.4 Key themes and analysis

The problem of work-life balance receives extensive recognition from Operations Managers and Managing Directors and Financial Directors. Most recent research supports the notion that leadership positions which demand too many hours at work along with travel prevent female advancement in their careers. The strategic leadership group comprised of Managing Directors and Supply Chain Managers shows high priority concerning career stagnation together with motherhood responsibilities. The highest endorsement of female career progression support comes from Supply Chain Managers and Managing Directors and Plant Managers. However operational and senior strategic roles are waking up to the fact that structured career development for women is important. One of the main challenges faced by Senior Managers in Franchise Operations, Operations Managers and Plant Managers is lack of leadership programs. This indicates inadequacy of structured training and mentorship programmes for aspiring women leaders. HR Managers are the ones who mainly point out the lack of diversity quotas that people could emphasise on to hold structured policies for gender balanced leadership manufacturing organisation needs to have. The stress and conflict among workplace leadership positions is relatively low; there is minimal recognition from the HR and Operations Managers. Employees complain about stress, and nowhere does it mention stress as less for women leaders, but being low on that means women face more systemic as opposed to immediate interpersonal issues at work.

5.5 Comparative analysis of leadership levels

Managing Directors, Chief Information Officers and Financial Directors occupying senior leadership positions are engaged less directly with gender bias and diversity concerns. They also mention having rather fewer worries about delayed promotion, implying that, if indeed such challenges were ever encountered earlier in their career, they have already been able to surmount them. However, they recognise that though the challenges of work-life balance and motherhood exist at higher levels, nevertheless, they continue to exist. With the exception of HR Managers, senior management, also known as middle management as well as Plants Managers the more engaged with gender bias and inclusion concerns. Frequently, they recognise delayed promotions and the absence of leadership programs as major hurdles. Overall, these findings demonstrate that gender diversity at middle management is a crucial battleground to advance. While some specialized leadership roles are concerned, such as of Principal Engineers, senior managers in Franchise Operations, and Safety & Plant Managers, they point out that they are more strongly concerned with the advocacy of leadership. While they recognise the barriers of leadership programs, they are indifferent to diversity quotas.

To overcome these gender related barriers, organisations need to ensure the existence of targeted leadership programmes. However, because of such a considerable mention about female leadership development gap, companies can implement mentorship initiatives and executive training programs for women. It is important to create diversity quotas and inclusive company policies so that there is an equitable representation at the senior leadership level. Work-life balance strategies (such as flexible working policies and family friendly leadership pathways) need be enhanced by organisations in order to prevent stagnation on account of motherhood and family caregiving responsibilities. This is very important to encourage career advocacy and sponsorship. High potential women should be actively sponsored by senior leaders to allow for fair progression of their career. Improved networking functions improve women's network access to facilitate connection of women with executive leaders for mentorship and sponsorship. Tracking career progression data by monitoring and evaluating promotion rates, leaders program participation rates, and retention will enable organisations to measure the effectiveness of their diversity initiatives.

Further research should be to conduct longitudinal studies that assess how women's leadership progresses over time and how interventions affect gender representation.

Moreover, examining intersectionality in leadership challenges identifies factors like race, socio-economic background, industry specialisation, which will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers and opportunities of being a manufacturing leader. Addressing these key areas will equip manufacturers to build a more inclusive and equitable leadership pipeline where more women are included in gender diverse and more advanced careers in manufacturing.

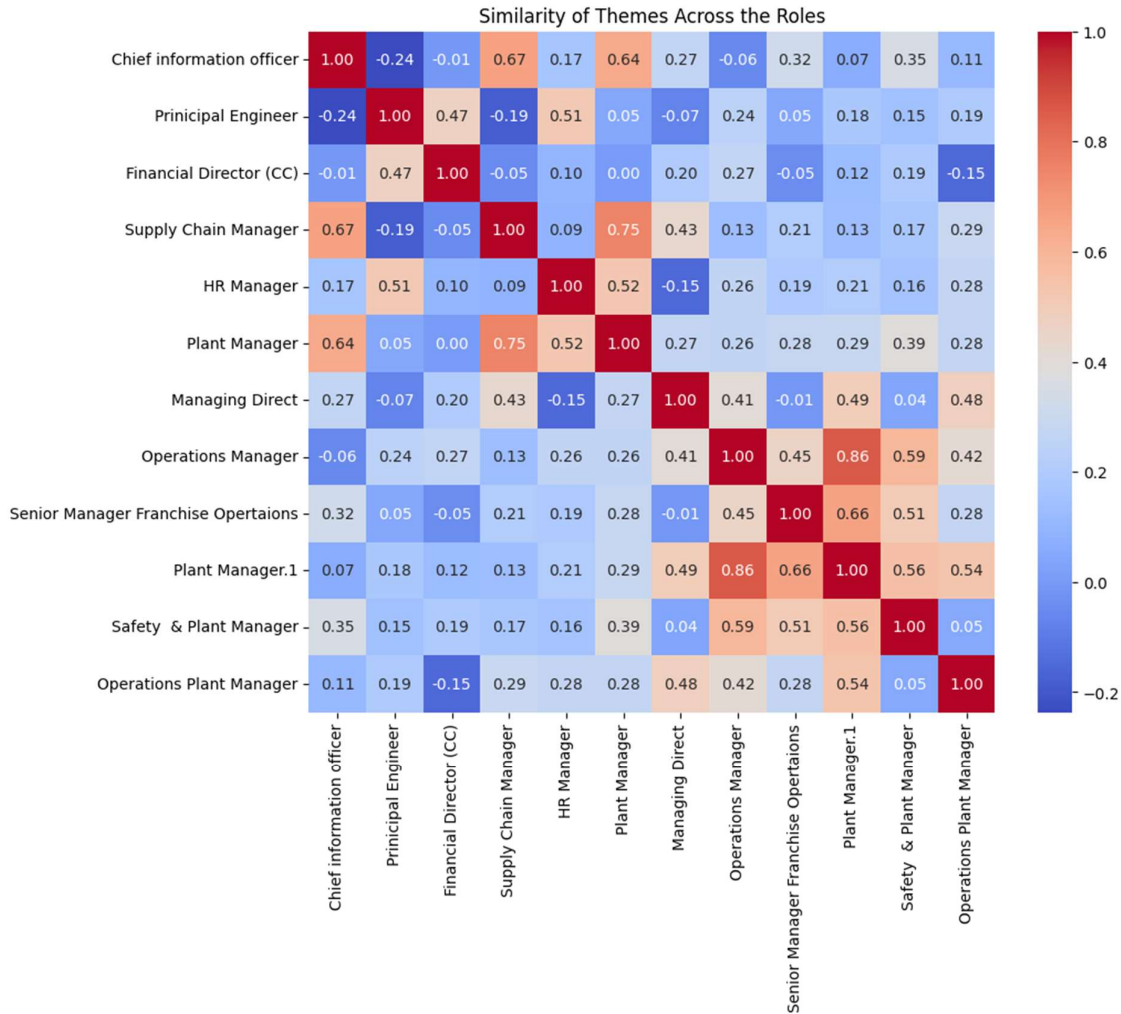


Figure 21: Heatmap of similarity of themes across the roles

Through the heatmap in Figure 9, one is able to depict the correlation between certain roles of leadership in South Africa’s manufacturing sector and their responses to some gender related themes. This makes it possible to understand which roles shared similar lines of thinking and which different points of view they had.

This means that if two leadership positions had similar concerns and viewpoints on gender related barriers and enablers, then, there would be a strong correlation (similar to 1). For instance, Operations Managers and Plant Managers have high similarity, implying that the people in these roles have the same perception about gender related issues. It may be due to their operational focus that subjects its members to comparable workplace dynamics including, for example, leadership's accessibility, mentorship's availability, and barriers to career advancement. Likewise, the HR Managers and Supply Chain Managers show a moderate correlation that could suggest that they share perspectives of workplace policies, diversity initiative, and inclusion practices.

A weak or negative correlation, on the other hand, implies dissimilar viewpoints. The Chief Information Officer (CIO) and Financial Director exhibit little to no similarities that suggest that financial executives and technology executives are different from each other in terms of their gender barriers. This could be because financial executives may focus more on policy and structural parts, and a CIO works with the technological aspects in which there is a marked difference in the writings by men and women.

Furthermore, Principal Engineers and Managing Directors are found to have low correlation, signifying that gender related problems are viewed differently by technical and executive leadership. While both engineers may be more inclined to focus on technical competencies and barriers that inhibit them to enter into male dominated fields, executive leaders may focus on more systemic challenges including, but not limited to lack of leadership representation or lack of advocacy to develop engineer identification and representation.

Across the heatmap, it is shown how the leadership roles differ in regard to gender related challenges. Responses are more aligned in operational and middle-management roles; while the strategic and technical leaders are more varied in their perceptions. Differentiation in this regard emphasises the need for role specific interventions for addressing gender bias and creating gender inclusive culture at all levels of leadership.

Table 5: Emerging themes of enablers and barriers from the interviews

| Enablers (Supporting Career Advancement) | Disablers (Hindering Career Progression) |
|---|---|
| Breaking Gender Bias | Delayed Promotion |
| Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership | Financial Responsibility |
| Education Access | Lack of Diversity Quotas |
| Empathetic Leadership | Lack of Leadership Programs |
| Leadership Advocacy in Career Advancement | Lack of Recognition |
| People-First Leadership | Motherhood and Career Stagnation |
| Support for Women's Career Progression | Stereotypical Leadership |
| Willingness to Progress | Work-Life Balance |
| | Workplace Conflict |
| | Workplace Stress |

5.6 Enablers for career progression

Below are enablers for career progression are the factors that support and accelerate women's advancement into senior positions in the manufacturing sector. These include access to education, organisational policies, mentorship, empathetic leadership development programs, and inclusive workplace cultures.

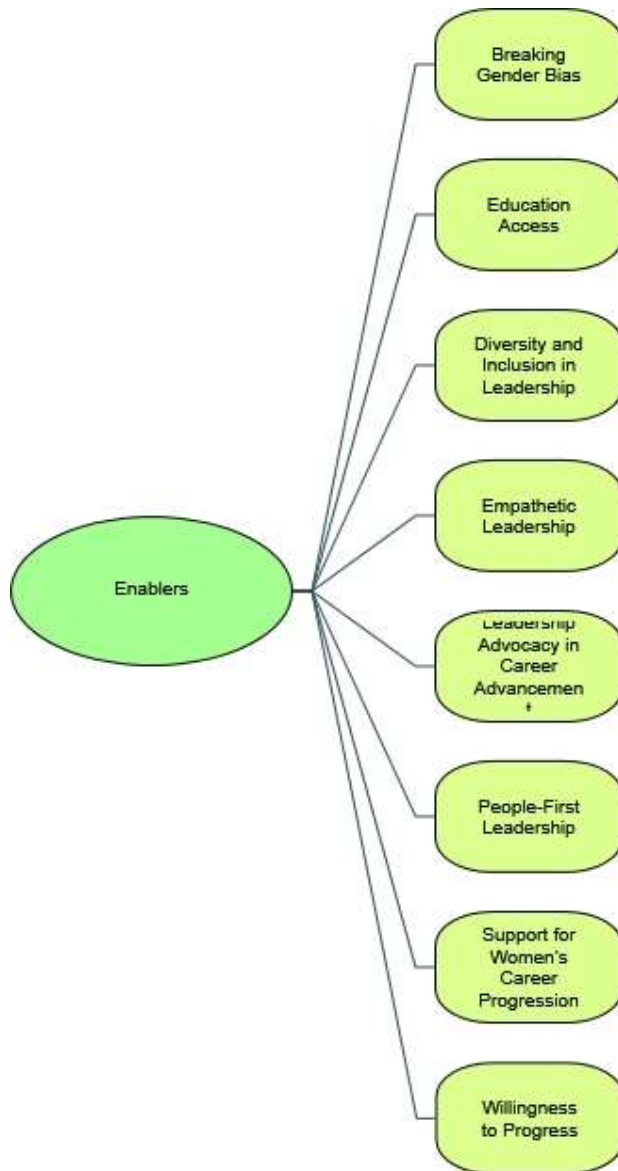


Figure 22: A Map of enablers in career progression of women to senior leadership

5.6.1 Gender bias in leadership perceptions

Leadership in male dominated industries is gender biased, and women are expected to be different from men. Many female leaders feel pressure to adopt traditionally masculine traits to gain credibility, a sentiment echoed by Participant 1, who noted that women in leadership roles often feel they must be *"much stronger than the men to prove themselves"*. As a result, female executives in such a culture might overwork themselves to prove to be competent, despite already holding valuable skills that are essential for a company's success.

Gender itself is gendered in how traits like firmness and authority are perceived. As Participant 1 observed, *"You get a man who's being firm, and he's being firm. You get a woman who's being firm, and she's being a bitch."* According to this discrepancy, women's assertiveness is perceived as aggressiveness and fosters stereotypes that detract from leadership effectiveness.

In addition, biases regarding various stages of a woman's life have a bearing on hiring and promotion decisions. Participant 1 highlighted a common scenario where male managers consider a woman's potential maternity leave when making hiring decisions, stating, *"We can't afford to have six months of them being off... so let's rather give it to the man."* These biases are detrimental to women's careers and uphold the notion that women are less reliable employees.

Building further on the point, structural barriers also add to the underrepresentation of women in specific fields. Participant 2 recalled being the only female in her engineering office for years, emphasising the historical exclusion of women and the slow progress in gender diversification. The sentiment of needing *"thick skin"* to navigate a male-dominated environment was also shared by Participant 3, who noted that perceptions about women's physical limitations and potential absences due to pregnancy continue to affect how they are viewed in the workplace.

Furthermore, leadership gender bias is not just about women being excluded, but also on the point that women's accomplishments are not always accorded due respect. Participant 4 described being told that she would be promoted *"because [she is] a Black woman"*, rather than for her qualifications and experience, demonstrating how intersectional biases further complicate career advancement for women of different racial backgrounds. Participant 5 then indicated, there was a perception that the promotion of women, could cause resentment as men still dominated the executive positions.

These biases are becoming something organisations are starting to address through cultural shifts. Participant 2 highlighted their organisations efforts to foster inclusivity by ensuring *"everybody who's there is allowed their voice"*, illustrating how corporate values can support a more equitable environment. Nevertheless, change remains slow, and as

Participant 6 stated, "You will find people with a Stone Age mentality", indicating that traditional gender biases are deeply ingrained and require continuous efforts to dismantle. While there is growing awareness of gender bias in leadership, women are also facing major challenges that need to have systemic changes, policy support, and cultural shift in the organisations.

5.6.2 Diversity and inclusion in leadership

However, fostering an equitable workplace cannot be achieved without diversity and inclusion in leadership. Organisations that dedicate themselves to diverse leadership teams are investing in opening the opportunities to all employees and breaking the barriers. A single interviewee noted the relevance of having a team that is diverse and contains members who belong to different demographics, which includes people with disabilities.

"Yeah, definitely. First of all, so I mean I am very passionate about other areas as well. I have a lady with disability; therefore. In fact, the one side of her body is paralyzed. So my team, if I look to my team, I'm probably more than 50,0% woman than is men. I also have a person with disability. We go across all demographics. I think we're pretty good in that area."

In addition, being flexible with the different leadership approaches is an important factor towards promoting inclusion. An active leader who supports in employees' various life stages promotes a more inclusive work environment.

"Then also just be open to flexibility. I think I'm very flexible with my team because somebody will ask for time off and I'm like, you know, say, oh, they need to take their child to the doctor. Can they take leave? I'm like, 'no, you're not going to take leave. It's like, 'you're going to go take your kid to the doctor, you know, and you can make the time back'. It's not the sort of leave for taking your kid to the doctor. It really is about being flexible and trying to support them as they go through different phases. I don't think I have, I suppose my men, I mean, I've got lots of my male staff who take time off when their kids are sick because their wives can't take time off, you know? And I'm supportive of that too."

However, there are still challenges in many organisations. There are some industries that

still have difficulty overcoming biases ingrained in the system, and women and historically underrepresented groups struggle to make progress in their careers:

"But the actual work that I actually do is of another level. Thus, I (or you, as you may ask) asked myself, why am I working in a level higher than where I am being promoted? Sadly, in my organisation, and probably 10, 12 years of my career, it was just about the Old Boys Club. So, if you're friends with this person in like a senior position, you would make it. That's why still a lot of people in senior positions in my organisation are male. And White male. Then there was the whole shift to employment equity, which was a very good shift, but what that meant is it came at the same time as diversity and inclusion and women being allowed to be promoted or you know, that sounds so ridiculous but it's sadly the fact."

Increasing women's access to employment equity policies has seen the women considered for the leadership roles.

"So, I think, as you've mentioned, yes, employment equity is one of them where you try in terms of the policy to promote inclusivity as well. So, and there's also support initiatives in terms of women who are in those positions trying to also allow flexibility of some sort, because in this day and age some of the work that people do can be done remotely and if somebody needs that and there's scope for that - so the flexibility can be there."

Furthermore, it brings about changes among companies in treating diversity and inclusiveness, acknowledging the importance of diverse perspectives to leadership:

"And quite frankly, there are very capable female candidates out there so that you don't have to sacrifice on the company's performance in order to bring them in the field. There have also been changes occurring so, you know, but. So, if you go decades back you won't disagree with the fact that women were not wise enough. They just didn't have experience and they didn't have the education and they didn't have all sorts of things. Now that they at that point could argue that hiring a woman would cause the company to suffer for lost sales, there is a problem. But it is no longer the case. We have now got educated females who have got experience that is increasingly growing so it just merely makes sense to bring in. They bring a different perspective to the management of companies. You know, diverse perspectives, which at the end of the day is good for companies and it stands to their, it's a positive influence for them."

Some organisations have made tremendous strides, yet more still needs to be done to go beyond compliance and to weave diversity and inclusion into the fabric of the company. Providing leadership opportunities to all, regardless of gender, background or connections will lead to a more inclusive and innovative workforce.

5.6.3 Education access as an enabler

Education access is critical to enabling women's career progression into senior leadership in the manufacturing industry. By providing the necessary skills, qualifications and competencies they have what they need to get by the corporate hierarchy and to overcome systemic barriers, yet not what they envision themselves to be. This study shows that participants highlighted the importance of formal education, self-led learning and self-driven initiatives in their career progression.

The key insight provided by the participants is that the structures of education need to be such that career advancement is countered against bias by managers. Talking with Participant 1 again, they expressed that "*education is very, very important*", as it was for Participant 2. Such structures, of course, are being placed in education so it's not so dependent on management. With regards to competencies, you get evaluated by a committee. "*Promotion should not be handed out based on the amount of hours spent on the shop floor. It should be given based on your skillset, based on your competencies... and what value do you bring into that position?*"

But some women do not enjoy the support of organisations in this respect and end up tending to their own well-being by investing in their own learning. Participant 2 shared a personal experience of self-funding courses, stating, "*I don't care if they don't want to teach me. I am going to find out if they don't want me to learn. I had paid for the courses. There were many things that I did on my own that I didn't care whether they helped me or not.*"

Acquiring advanced qualifications up to MBA has proved to be an important asset to women in manufacturing for securing leadership roles. Participant 3 noted, "*Because I took the initiative and started to study the MBA, it really helped me that when the opportunity came, they were able to see that I'm capable to perform in the role rather than*

employing someone else to be a CFO." This is an example of how attaining proactive educational levels empowers women to have more leadership opportunities.

In addition, the continuing gender biases in women's manufacturing activity has increased the relative significance of women's higher qualifications as a compensation mechanism against the perception of incompetence. As Participant 4 articulated, *"I think especially as females, it's important to have the backup of the qualification because there's the perception that they do not view us as equal. That means, sadly, we have to do more than the males so that they can recognise."*

Apart from formal qualifications, continuous learning and professional development are considered very important and crucial to remain relevant in the industry. *"You never stop learning"* is Participant 5's quote of the day. Participant 5 continued to say *"because you cannot say that you know everything... If you can learn and keep growing, with professional development and continuous learning, then you can grow. Education that is ten years old expires; You have to keep building your skill, attend workshops, and get mentorship."*

Recruitment and promotion decisions are another important aspect related to access to education. Participant 6 explained, *"If you don't have a qualification, we're in a world where people are first compared on paper for suitable candidates. Those with a qualification is an enabler for somebody to actually think of it and evaluate you."* This demonstrates that educational credentials are becoming ever more essential in getting ahead in the world of work.

While some participants stressed the importance of individual efforts in relation to education of women, particularly the disadvantaged women, the same participants could also see how systemic support was required. Participant 7 expressed enthusiasm to start an initiative of *"funding a few girl children in the rural areas, [to] just emphasise education..."* Participant 7 expressed that *"when you are being exposed to, you suddenly notice how the world can be totally different"*.

Yet, while education is fundamental to enable, it does not always ensure a career in leading others. In the process to becoming a leader, she was often not enough in the eyes of male senior leadership, structural biases and networking challenges are still ever

present in organisations. As Participant 8 noted, *"You can have all this experience and all these nice qualifications, but now it's about building a network of people who are able to speak for you in the right forums. It just helps, then, when they do speak of you, they can stress your track record and credentials."*

Finally, education access is a vital enabler for women to reach the senior echelons if they are to feature in the leadership of manufacturing. Nothing compares to formal qualifications in terms of laying a path and opening doors, but continual learning and ongoing self-directed educational efforts add to it to fortify a women's career path. However, eliminating gender biases and building the organisational support structures are vital to realising the potential of female talent and giving them the leadership opportunities in the industry that education promises.

5.6.4 Empathetic leadership

Strong empathetic leadership is a strong enabler for management being effective — it creates trust, emotional intelligence and support in teams. Empathy as practiced by a leaders results in an environment where employees feel valued, understood, and inspired to perform at the peak. The data shows how leaders use empathy in the interaction with their teams in a variety of ways.

Participant 1 highlighted the significance of paying attention to the employees' well-being and the weekly one-on-one meetings as well as keeping an open door to discuss whatever. *"I'm very attentive to, I can see [a team member] is a little bit quiet today. You okay? We'll chat in the kitchen, you know?"* This way enables leaders to spot signs that an employee is struggling and help in a timely manner. Participant 1 also highlighted the role of emotional intelligence in leadership, stating, *"I've had times where some of my team members have had a really bad meeting. Whatever has been shouted at them, it isn't by me – it's somebody else. So I'm like, all right, you're going home now. You know, off you go, send them home because they're not in the headspace to be where they are."*

Participant 2 thought of her role as a servant leader as one of collaboration rather than authority. *"It's not like a dictatorship where I'm saying to you, 'do this now, otherwise I'm going to give you a warning.' I don't do that. I'll be like, 'Come, let's go and do this thing together. Let's figure it out.'" However, compared to other leadership styles, this style of*

leadership promotes trust, and the employees are always feeling supported rather than being exploited. Participant 2 also reflected on the unexpected emotional aspects of leadership: *"Nobody tells you this when you're in management, that you actually need to be a counsellor"*. She then went on to explain *"there were lots of one to ones that I used to have with the people, counselling you know? And I saw myself many times with the one to one that I used to have with the people. So, it was quite realistic."*

Participant 3 reflected on the role of personal development and encouragement in leadership. *"I also encourage my team to develop themselves, as well. It helps that I model that as well. I'm not only telling them, and they can also see."* This modelling of growth fosters a culture of continuous improvement and motivation among employees.

Another theme that came from the interviews was the importance of mentorship, teamwork, and having the right people around you that would mentor you. Participant 4 shared that *"people that are easy to work as a team with and that correct you when you are going in the wrong direction."*

Participant 5 noted that patient handling of workplace problems is something that was needed: *"They have been raised not to be super annoyed because a lot of people have been raised that way."* They don't know any better. *"It just felt like when you have to subtly educate them"*. And an additional suggestion was that leaders should handle difficult situations with tact rather than confrontation; *"You can do it in an elegant way. People will see that, they will learn their lessons, they will grow, they will grow in a good way from it."* Likewise, in alignment with what was mentioned by Participant 6, it was viewed that leadership opportunities and promotions frequently rely on being in the right networks with the correct visibility. *"At the end of the day, people promote people, right? So, if you're not in that mix and you're not in the right rooms, then it is a bit of a limitation."*

Empathetic leadership does not merely involve the leaders' understanding of the emotions of their employees but they also have to effectively support, encourage and lead them towards growth. These qualities play a great role in employee engagement and productivity as well as organisation's success.

5.6.5 Support for women's career progression

Enabling women's career progression is a journey spanning diverse aspects like acknowledging individual differences, offering avenues for growth, facilitating connections with senior colleagues as mentors and addressing the challenges stemming from systems. This led to valuable insights from participants around how organisations and individuals can help move the dial on advancing women into their careers.

It is pointed out that it is necessary to support women at their current stages in life and responsibility. As one participant noted, *"I think what's very important to be able to support women as they progress is first of all, to be supportive of their current needs. Okay. So, I mean, I've just got one of my managers now who's pregnant and will go off in January."* Women only need to be understood and accepted with their different life phases, without being penalised for commitment to personal roles. Another participant reinforced this perspective, emphasising the need to balance team dynamics to prevent resentment: *"You have to stand up to the other team members going, yeah, but, you know, yes, they took the time off because of a school play or whatever. But they kind of worked until 10 o'clock at night, you know."*

Many women cite career development programs as enabling their advancement as well as structured growth pathways. One participant mentioned *"Stellenbosch University is one of the Universities that has a management development program and it's a structured one. There are various levels of it, both at the MBA level, one called the general manager and one which is the one I did, (the last one I did) is very much for MBA guys and then the other one, something more practical. So, it's a good, very robust, very recognised program and it definitely does equip the individual to take on any progression."*

Yet, there remain systemic challenges: the 'Old Boys Club' is still alive. *"I was in the news business for probably 10 to 12 years of my career, and for it was really just the 'Old Boys Club',* said one participant. This illustrates the structural barriers that continue to affect women's career advancement even when they are willing, eligible and deserving to do so.

Another important value is the responsibility of women to assist each other in the workplace. One of the participants mentioned *"I have seen that women need to support other women more, and as much as I would like to progress, I also have others women to support around me. Again, in manufacturing, it is sort of quite a lot of the time that the*

women are not supporting each other enough". This only goes to buttress the need to cultivate a milieu where women truly mentor and encourage one another and not get competitive, in ways that may be unproductive for their career growth.

Targeted training and talent management initiatives can also improve women's career growth within organisations. One participant explained *"it just comes in with the training opportunities, I mean offering bursaries to employees and earmarking specifically females and then looking at trainings"*. It is crucial to identify gaps and to work with performance management systems close to them, in order to ensure that women can compete for leadership.

Enablers of career progression include mentoring and succession planning. It's one thing as one participant put it to have a mentor and somebody that can do succession planning. One participant said *"if you don't have a mentor, and you don't have someone that can do succession planning, you're not guaranteed for anything. If you have got management that is looking toward the future and seeing the potential in people and being able to grow people accordingly, then that is able to allow you to be ready for the next position,"*.

Women's promotion is affected by external influences like male allies in leadership positions. One participant mentioned *"I've seen both, but as an individual I've seen more people pro this than anti this, which is also the reason that I feel that I've had the opportunity as being able to progress"*. Having support from senior leadership, particularly knowing that there are leaders that see potential and nurture it, can make a big impact on career progression.

Family support structures outside the workplace are part of career advancement. One participant commented *"I think definitely support from the family is a proper big plus because my husband understands what I do. He's not intimidated, he's not insecure. That's why I mean, I work a lot of men, I know a lot of men in this industry"*. Women can take on career challenges without the extra baggage when they have a strong support system in their person.

Finally, sponsorship and advocacy in organisations are important to overcome barriers. One participant stated *"we also need sponsors, and sponsors aligned with people that will be advocates for women in areas and platforms where the conversation about women*

would have otherwise not been had". Companies must move beyond policy statements and execute initiatives on their behalf that promote women's professional growth and leadership.

All in all, women's career progression needs to be supported by commitment from their organisation, through either individual support or mentorship, structured development programmes, and strong advocacy. Such practices ensure that barriers facing women in their careers are addressed both in the personal and professional domains.

5.6.6 Willingness to progress

An aspect of progressing with a willingness to do so is important to advance a career, especially when it comes to surmounting systemic and cultural barriers. Self-confidence, learning and perseverance were all emphasised by participants as means of getting through challenges in the workplace.

According to Participant 1, it is key to show value and actively look for mentorship. The statement advised people not to have to apologise for personal responsibilities like childcare, but instead build strong support. Additionally, wherever mentorship is not readily available, individuals need to proactively seek mentorship even outside their organisation.

When Participant 2 was asked how they have been driven by an internal determination to succeed in the face of challenges, they responded by highlighting the significance on the confidence from a managerial perspective and admitted that their motivation was just from wanting to test their abilities. Those who had such an outlook continued their career journey and proved that a positive attitude plays a significant role in success.

Participant 3 described how they were frustrated when external hires are prioritised for promotion, while internal employees possess the same skills. So, in response, they decide to improve themselves professionally outside their organisation. Moreover, they stress the importance of continuous improvement, to oneself as well as others. Modelling commitment to growth allowed them to fulfil themselves by watching others succeed because of their encouragement.

Participant 4 echoed the role of confidence and self-motivation and moved from an entry level administrative role to an HR managerial position through effort and learning. They mentioned that self-doubt can cause a person to be ineffective a leader and they emphasised the need for a leader to believe in themselves and be confident.

Participant 5 underlined the importance of adaptability and the ability to jump on opportunities, as they moved across various industries before entering the realm of business management. This was also demonstrated by their journey, where they were open to confronting new challenges and taking on knowledge to progress in their career.

Participant 6 interjected, giving another perspective on self-advocating and knowing one's worth. In male dominated industries, they stressed that for someone without confidence, they could be ignored because they hadn't asserted themselves enough. Active standing up for oneself and falsification of the misconceptions helped them to find their way in the professional environment.

Participant 7 had the same to say with regards to the effect of mentorship and the sharing of knowledge. Seniority is not needed to get in to senior leadership programs, they pointed out — leadership can be performed from the beginning of one's career. They urged other women to follow the same proactive approach and adopt the confidence and ambition that many of their male colleagues embodied.

Participant 8 discussed his experience of being prompted as too bold to apply to a job in which he 'didn't fit the dot-for-dot' on the job requirements. The men apply for roles that do not fit their profile, but women hold back. It points out the importance for people to refuse to be restricted by their self-imposed boundaries and take risk in it to grow in career.

Lastly, Participant 9 mentioned that concrete results are always better than arguments. A good track record is also said to dispel negative perceptions, as 'reputation follows data', and performance metrics are indisputable proof of competence and achievement. It echoes the fact that consistent effort in conjunction with tangible results are essential key indicators advancing your career.

The stories of these participants also demonstrate that success is enabled by a willingness to go forward. Overcoming barriers and achieving professional growth is a result of

confidence, resilience, the commitment to self-improvement, and being proactive in engaging with mentors and opportunities.

5.7 Barriers for Career Progression

The below figure explores the key barriers that hinder career progression, particularly for women in the workplace. These barriers include structural challenges such as lack of diversity quotas and leadership programs, as well as social factors like workplace conflict and stereotypical leadership.

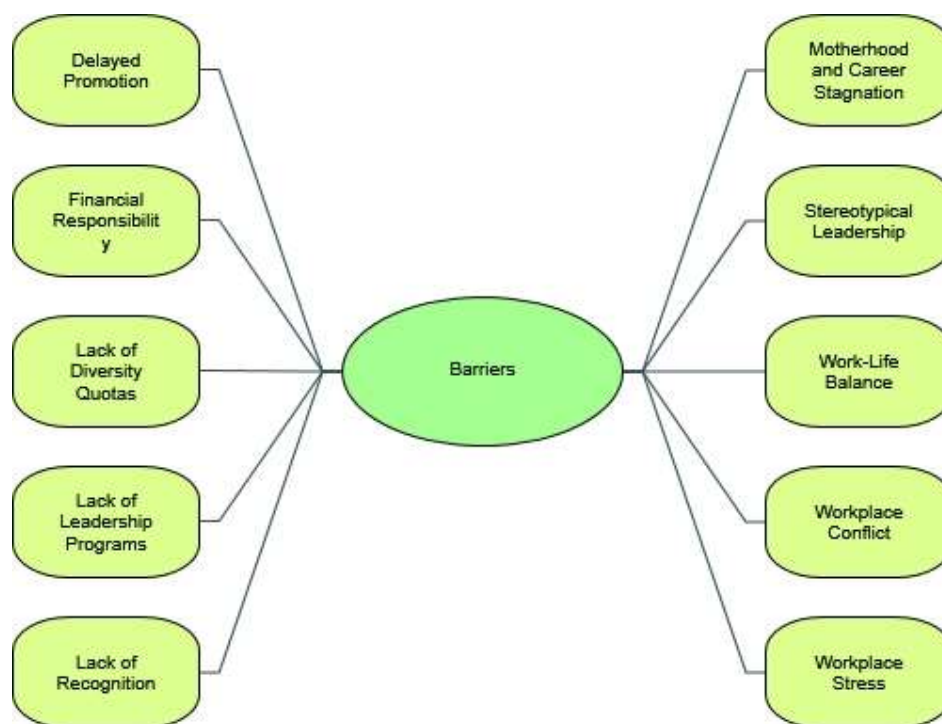


Figure 23: Barriers in Career Progression of Women to Senior Leadership Positions

5.7.1 Gender bias and exclusion from decision-making

The barrier to women in manufacturing still remains gender bias. Generally, women are excluded from critical processes of decision making and leadership roles. Participant 1 highlighted this issue, stating: *“The barriers maybe is where men are maybe still a bit intimidated or not comfortable. Perhaps not even intimidated, only uncomfortable having women at the table to make decisions that have historically been decided by men. Maybe the feelings of you wouldn’t know – you’re unexperienced enough.”*

Participant 2 also about exclusion and said that the exclusion is reinforced by underlying prejudices: *"There's a lot of... What I want to use are the words that will block: This is not where we are going to be and it should be only men, men should be here because only men can make the right decision."*

5.7.2 Lack of Leadership Advocacy and Mentorship

Finally, women face more obstacles in career progression because they lack leadership support and mentorship. One participant, Participant 3, expressed their frustration for being overlooked even though they were qualified and more experienced. Participant 3 stated: *"Two years into the role, same thing, raise my hand, hey, I'm ready. In this, I have shown this in my results. This is what I've done. 'Not for this role, not yet.' Same thing, where I am now stuck again. And I applied for two roles within the company, didn't get the roles, didn't get interviewed, I got rejected."*

Participant 4 also pointed to the sponsorship element within leadership and commented: *"And for you to move up, you need a sponsor in an executive role that is influential... You even need somebody in the room when those conversations go on, they know, oh yes, I know you guys are looking for this, I know [her], put her on your shortlist, interview her."*

5.7.3 The 'Old Boys' Club' and workplace culture

A common challenge presented in response to participants is for men to have excluded women from leadership positions due to the entrenchment of established male networks. Participant 5 detailed that as these informal groups also limit a women's opportunities. They stated that: *"There are some occasions though, even with all of that, where the work that I do and the work that I take on is essentially, is at another level. This was after I asked myself (or may ask yourself why): Why make work for someone who works higher than you when you are not getting promoted? And for sadly as long as pretty much most of my career in the organisation, it was really the 'Old Boys Club'."*

Similarly, Participant 6 commented on how crisis-driven leadership opportunities are given to women. Participant 6 commented that: *"The women I have seen that have been pushed into those positions are in crisis mode. Because when the company is not doing well, they put a woman in that position, you know?"*

5.7.4 Work-life balance and career stagnation

Women face another major hurdle too; balancing family responsibilities and career aspirations. As Participant 7 explained, company culture is too often already punishing women for this: *"I think I'm in a much better space now where my manager is quite flexible. Yes, we're at the plant every day you know. But if I have anything with my kid or whatnot, I can just call and say, 'I'm not coming in today. Whereas previously, it's almost like shunned upon when you say you want to do something for your kid and it's like...hey you again, starting this."*

Participant 8 also mentioned that difficult to strike a balance between long working hours, they mentioned the following: *"So work-life balance, s'joe, it's a difficult one. Obviously, I think it also depends largely on the person's position and depending on the resources you have. And sometimes, there is not enough resource to balance. Participant 8 really felt like they needed to stay at work all hours long, impacting on their work-life balance."*

5.7.5 Lack of training and leadership development programs

Women's limited access to training and leadership development programs severely obstructs career advancement. According to Participant 9, they had failed at one leadership program: *"Then, so we have Black women Initiatives where they chose five Black females and they were on this fast track basically to GM, and stuff like that. In fact, that was an absolute failure, and funny enough. Of those five people, there is only one person still there."*

Participant 10 also observed that leadership programs typically fail for a lack of support, as the following statement: *"People are on those programs, but they don't get the support. They do not sit in meetings and they're taken seriously. I mean, I don't like those programs so much. There have been programs, but I haven't seen them be successful, to be honest."*

5.7.6 Resistance to women in leadership

A majority of participants revealed that a woman assuming a leadership position was met with resistance from male colleagues and superiors. According to Participant 11, their qualifications were undermined. Participant 11 said: *"There was a change of CEO, I remember; and initially, he proceeded as if he was mentoring me, and then I was showing*

him all my insecurities, and he eventually weaponized them against me. It was really more toxic... And so, they needed to take one [CFO]. Another White guy, been with the company ages and all, just has a BCom. He went and chose him and I, I'm a Black woman, and a CA."

Likewise, Participant12 expressed something similar, and stated: *"If you have results to back up your confidence, it doesn't matter what people say about you. They will see from the results. Legitimately, people have opinions about you. If you saw a scorecard that exemplifies what I am, it is impossible to contest that."*

5.8 Summary table of findings

Table 6: Frequency of the themes

| Themes | Frequency | Percentages |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| Breaking Gender Bias | 27 | 14 |
| Delayed Promotion | 8 | 4 |
| Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership | 14 | 7 |
| Education Access | 19 | 10 |
| Empathetic Leadership | 8 | 4 |
| Financial Responsibility | 1 | 1 |
| Lack of Diversity Quotas | 2 | 1 |
| Lack of Leadership Programs | 16 | 8 |
| Lack of Recognition | 12 | 6 |
| Leadership Advocacy in Career Advancement | 13 | 7 |
| Motherhood and Career Stagnation | 15 | 8 |
| People-First Leadership | 3 | 2 |
| Stereotypical Leadership | 7 | 4 |
| Support for Women's Career Progression | 17 | 9 |
| Willingness to progress | 14 | 7 |
| Work-Life Balance | 14 | 7 |
| Workplace Conflict | 3 | 2 |
| Workplace stress | 1 | 1 |

As seen in the table above, Breaking Gender Bias was the most often mentioned theme in the responses and represented 14% of the responses demonstrating that stereotypes and discrimination are still deeply entrenched and impede the advancement of women. Both of these — Education Access and Support for Women's Career Progression — receive 9%, indicating both the value of providing formal educational opportunities and structured career support, to enhance their chances of women ascending to senior

leadership. Considering 8% each, Lack of Leadership Programs and Motherhood and Career Stagnation indicate that lack of training opportunities and the impact of the caregiving responsibilities are also among the major hurdles. Meanwhile, 7% each represent Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership, Willingness to Progress, Work-Life Balance, and Leadership Advocacy in Career Advancement that suggest that it is important to create an inclusive culture, individuals must be driven, flexible work policies must be in place, and active leadership advocacy in career advancement is needed to support women in the leadership journey. While themes such as Delayed Promotion, Empathetic Leadership, Stereotypical Leadership and People First Leadership arise with less frequency, they do help to articulate the demand for fair promotion practices, empathetic leadership styles and egalitarian workplace culture. In sum, the data shows how systemic attempts to tackle deep embedded gender biases, access to leadership development, and broad support, including support around motherhood, drive women’s resilience and bolster women’s progression to senior leadership roles.

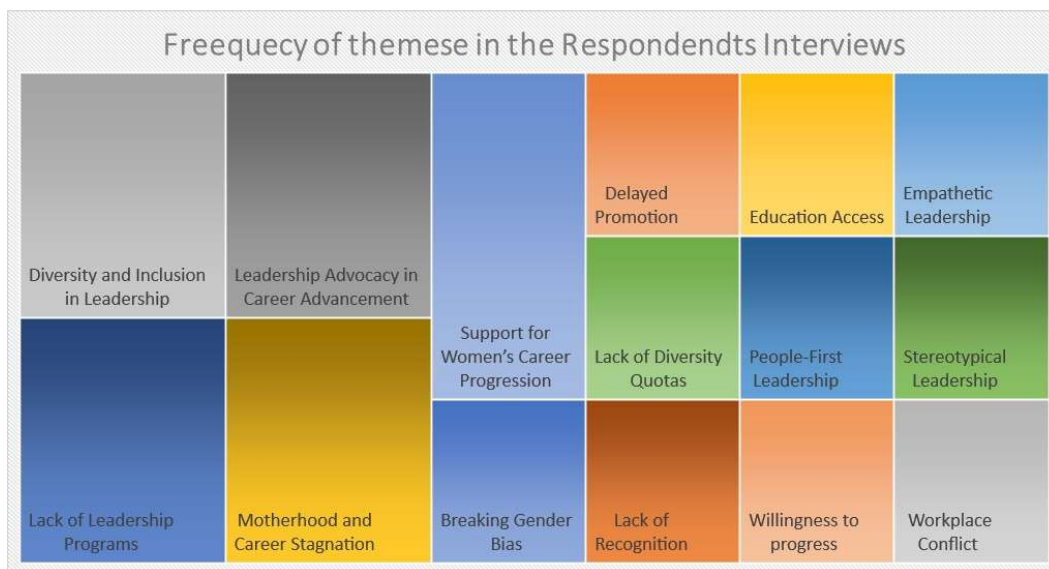


Figure 24: Tree map for Frequency of Themes

The tree map above reflects the frequency of themes arising from interviews that explored resilience, enablers, and barriers to women’s career progression into senior leadership roles. The bigger the block, the larger the size, and the more often a theme mentioned. Specifically, Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership, Leadership Advocacy in Career Advancement, No Leadership Programs, and Motherhood and Career Stagnation are the most recurring themes we see, meaning that leadership opportunities are systemically

conflated with career stagnation, especially for mothers. Less common themes are Support for Women’s Career Progression, Breaking Gender Bias, Lack of Diversity Quotas, Lack of Recognition, and Delayed Promotion, which reflect that women progress slower due to institutional lack of support and recognition. Furthermore, the blocks are small, focusing on Education Access, Empathetic Leadership, People First Leadership, Stereotypical Leadership, a movement towards Progress, and Workplace Conflict and the remarkable opportunities, challenges, and legal requirements associated to break through stereotypical thinking. Overall, the analysis implies that improving leadership programs, advocacy, recognition, and work–life balance policies support would contribute to the progress of women in senior leadership positions.

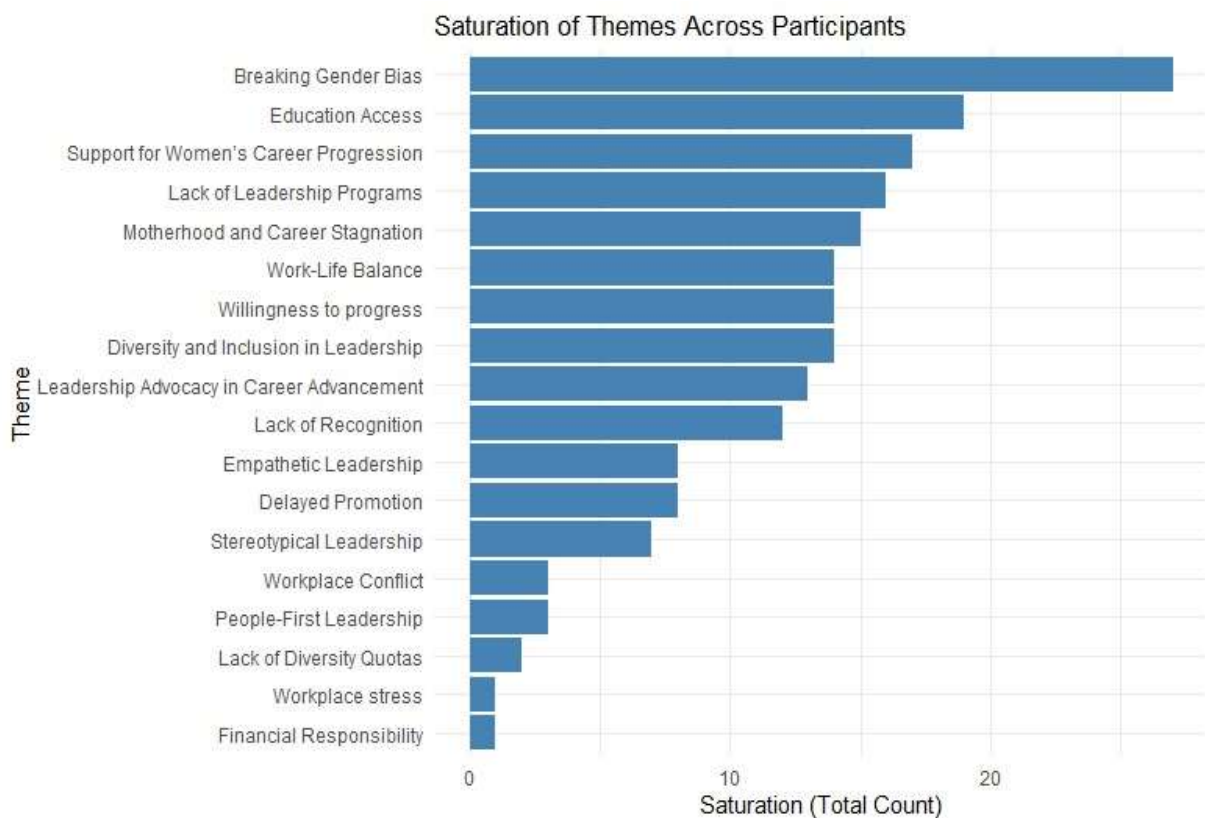


Figure 13: Saturation of the themes during interviews

The above Figure 13 depicts the saturation of themes identified during qualitative interviews, illustrating the frequency with which certain topics emerged across participants. Saturation occurred when no new themes were identified, indicating that further interviews were unlikely to yield additional insights. In this study, saturation was reached when recurring themes such as "Breaking Gender Bias," "Education Access," and "Support for Women’s Career Progression" consistently appeared across

participants. These were the most frequently discussed themes, highlighting persistent barriers to career advancement. Other notable themes that contributed to saturation included "Lack of Leadership Programs," "Motherhood and Career Stagnation," and "Work-Life Balance," reflecting the structural and societal challenges women face in their careers. Less frequently mentioned themes, such as "Workplace Conflict," "Lack of Diversity Quotas," and "Financial Responsibility".

5.9 Conclusion

In the case of the manufacturing industry of South Africa, the barriers faced by women illustrate a deep entrenched gender biases and the structural limitations that prevent women's progression through their careers. In order to engage with these issues, there must be proactive leadership advocacy, equitable training, and transformation of workplace cultures to end exclusionary practices. Companies can make meaningful interventions so talented women can get the opportunities and the support they need in order to advance to senior leadership ranks.

Chapter 6: Findings and Results

6.1 Introduction

Despite efforts to promote gender equity in the manufacturing sector, South Africa's manufacturing finds it hard to represent women in senior management roles. This research looks at enablers and barriers to women's career progression and obtains some insights into the structural, organisational, and societal parameters that enable or hinder leadership advancement. Issues like gender bias, workplace exclusion, lack of mentors and challenges in balancing work and life were identified in the analysis of the collected data and the literature reviewed. As such, leadership that supports them, sponsorship programs, and career strategies to help them be resilient, become important enablers for women to ascend in their careers.

This discussion chapter also examines how the theoretical concepts match with real world experience to integrate these finding with existing literature. Further, several conceptual perspectives, such as Social Role Theory and Career Resilience Theory, are presented in the literature review, which aid in explaining the mechanisms of how women cope with the barriers they encounter in male dominated industries and how they are perceived as gendered leaders. Through weighing empirical evidence against the existing body of research, this chapter offers a nuanced meaning of how systemic hurdles affect women's professional pursuit, and what interventions have the most potential to develop gender inclusive leadership.

Such a study provides evidence on one of the main themes that have been emerging from this study— gender stereotypes are not only deeply embedded in organisational culture, but often are unquestioned and become norms of behaviour for members of an organisation. Resistance to giving leadership roles to women in the manufacturing sector is often encountered due to traditional leadership traits that are almost equalled with masculinity in that sector. The same pattern emerged in various studies that show the 'think manager, think male' stereotype still determining people's decisions on whom to hire and promote. Progressive policies to promote gender diversity have been and continue to be enacted by companies, yet women's leadership potential is not widely accepted in

workplace cultures. Moreover, structural barriers such as fewer access to mentorship programs and leadership training programs, contribute to the glass ceiling effect.

In addition to this, the results also tell us that career resilience is an important factor that helps overcome workplace obstacles. It usually takes women who transition into senior roles to proactively network, apply self-advocacy, and leverage support systems in their organisations. The literature has stressed that mentorship and sponsorship are important to career advancement yet many women in the manufacturing sector report access to the influential types of mentors. Therefore, targeted interventions should be developed to help women meet professional demands by providing them resources and support that can be utilised for overcoming professional challenges.

Additionally, the study shows that though there are policy frameworks intended to propel gender equity, their adoption in various organisations is erratic. Incremental progress is made with the National Development Plan and employment equity policies, but with disparities in the workforce, particularly at executive level. Overall, the findings indicate that constrained supply in women's education and labour force participation combined with the lack of structural changes in organisational policies and practices (such as mandatory diversity quotas, transparent promotion pathways, and flexibility at work) limit women's representation in senior leadership.

Drawing on and connecting the flow of this material to the wider body of academic literature on this subject, this chapter systematically analyses these themes in the context of the study's empirical findings. Doing this provides recommendations on how to address gender disparities in leadership and presents possible actions to create an inclusive workplace culture. Ultimately, women in manufacturing are called upon to be at the forefront of leadership pipelines with the means and authorisation to make it.

6.2 Answering the research questions

6.2.1 Research Question 1: Enablers for women's career progression

This study's findings identify several key enablers that positively contribute to women's career progression from middle to senior management levels in manufacturing firms. On the other hand, it incorporates mentorship and sponsorship, transformational leadership, flexible workplace policies, and specific career development initiatives.

The researcher shows how mentorship and sponsorship are essential components in promoting women's career advancement. Professional guidance, emotional support and visibility in hierarchical structures are offered via mentorship (Bahrami et al., 2023). Sponsorship, having senior leaders carry women's career advancement torch, is a big accelerator — women can make the jump to key leadership roles. These assertions corroborate past research that emphasises the significance of mentorship in advancing one's career, especially in male biased industries (Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024).

Another significant enabling is transformational leadership. Women leaders who wield this leadership style work towards the creation of inclusive environments that break the traditions of male dominated structures and thereby contribute more towards diversity in leaderships positions from gender (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022). This finding validates such research that suggests transformational leadership constitutes toward the improvement of organisational culture and dealing with acceptance of women in leadership (Kark & Shamir, 2002).

It also empowers women's career resilience through flexible workplace policies like remote work options and parental leave. Findings reveal that higher retention rates within women in leadership roles are seen in organisations using these policies (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). This corroborates previous studies which argue that the adoption of the flexible work arrangement massively contributes to the gender equity in leadership positions (Fitong Ketchiwou & Van Der Walt, 2023).

Targeted career development programmes particularly leadership training and executive coaching programmes, develop women's essential skills in order to progress through their career. The research suggests that companies with structured leadership development

programs have a higher group of women in senior posts. These findings support past research that further recommends structured career progression plans as necessary enabler towards women's leadership advancement (Haegele & Maher, 2023).

6.2.2 Research Question 2: Barriers to women's career progression

The findings were used to determine the barriers that impede the career progress of women in the manufacturing industry. Among these barriers identified in the research are: gender stereotyping, being excluded from professional networks, problems of work-life balance, and organisational resistance to women in management positions.

Thus, new gender stereotypes are still one of the biggest obstacles, which determines the "Think Manager — Think Male" proverb (Schein, 1973). Women in senior roles reported being looked at askance in regards to their leadership capacity, which supports the Social Role Theory supporting that leadership is contextualized by norms in society (Eagly & Wood, 1991). The study reiterates previous findings (Moalusi & Jones, 2019) that stereotypical beliefs inhibit women's opportunity to occupy executive roles.

A limited access to professional networks makes career progression even harder, as observed by Modisenyane (2023) whose study found that women have unequal access to informal sponsorship and networking opportunities as men; hence, these are structural disadvantages. Lastly, the findings from this research support existing evidence showing that networking disparities are one of the most prominent career obstacles for women in male dominated industries (Bishu & Headley, 2020).

Despite this, work-life balance is still a tricky issue and it remains to be a real problem for female senior leaders. This study reveals long working hours, inflexible job expectations and cultural biases towards women as caregivers are increasing the pressure on women. The findings emanating from this research are consistent with those of prior research on work-life integration issues and differences in leadership between men and women (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

In particular, the researcher defines a significant challenge as resistance to women in leadership positions within manufacturing organisations. Women are found to be subject to more scrutiny and are held to a higher level of performance than men. This corresponds

with the well-known 'glass ceiling' and 'glass cliff' phenomena, where women have to fight to reach leadership positions which they are more likely to be appointed to under perilous times for the organisation (Shrestha et al., 2023).

6.2.3 Research Question 3: Impact of policy and interventions

It studies the efficacy of gender equity policies and corporate initiatives in promoting gender equity as a part of women's career advancement in the South African manufacturing industry. Policies like the National Development Plan (NDP) and Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) aimed at the promotion of gender inclusivity, are not unconditionally and uniformly implemented in manufacturing organisations in South Africa.

Incremental progress has been brought about by government policies that make it necessary for there to be a balanced representation of gender in leadership. Yet, it has come to light that enforcement mechanisms are sometimes weak and many organisations actually carry on with policies lightly. This resonates with the findings put forward in a previous study on the slow translation of gender equity policy into action on the workplace (Commission for Gender Equality, 2021).

Leadership development programs and gender equity training are not as effective as corporate interventions. Based on the findings the researcher found that although programs like this do exist, they tend not to be sustained and do not deal with deep seated cultural biases in organisations. This is consistent with research that such policies are not effective without corporate commitment and strong accountability (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

The study also looks at South African initiatives compared to global trends, such as South Africa's upper hand in the ratio of women in senior management (42.0%) and the low percentage of women CEOs (15.0%). This indicates there is a gap in demand for executive leadership pipelines and mentorship frameworks expected by the global best practices which are based on building long term career development strategies, is indicated (KPMG, 2023).

Although policies have progressed, there is a long way to go on implementation. Many participants in their interviews revealed that their organisations would rather adopt a

compliance driven approach as opposed to cultivating true inclusivity. In bridging this gap, companies need to treat gender equity goals as part of the core business strategy in order for gender parity in leadership positions to be sustained (Naidoo et al., 2024).

Therefore, policies and corporate initiatives have partially contributed in improving the gender representation, but these initiatives are not that effective because of inconsistent implementation and are too drenched cultural practices. It takes much more than a few of those solutions for organisations to make meaningful progress; it requires whole institutions adopting large, well backed gender equity strategies that address structural and cultural challenges to women advancing in leadership.

6.3 Critical reflection on key themes

6.3.1 *Broader implications of findings*

According to this study, women still continue to struggle in attaining senior leadership positions in the South African manufacturing sector. Although progress towards gender representation has been made, it remains entrenched in the organisation's structures and societal norms. Therefore, the fact that women are misrepresented in top management is a representation of systematic biases against women's access to leadership positions.

The main takeaway from this research is that, on average, the women's representation in organisation's leadership is higher in organisations with proactive gender equity initiatives. The companies that excel at mentorship, sponsorship and leadership development programs will reach more women at the peak of their potential. Gender diversity, however, is still merely treated as a box ticking exercise in many organisations resulting in slow progress. This study shows that employment equity policies in South Africa's for instance, the National Development Plan (NDP) and Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), have provided strong policies underpinned in gender inclusivity which are not being effectively implemented. The existing policies remain far from driving change as long as the current enforcement mechanisms are not significantly strengthened.

An even more crucial implication of this is that corporate cultures must be reoriented so as to question gender biases. There remains a perception that the leadership qualities of being assertive, competitive and decisive are masculine traits, and women are held at a

disadvantage in executive roles. The widely accepted notion of ‘think manager, think male’ also impacts on hiring and promotion decisions. In other words, merely by achieving a leadership position, women need to work twice as hard to prove themselves capable as men. Thus, organisations need to embrace inclusive leadership frameworks that recognise and reward diverse styles of leadership.

6.3.2 Link to feminist and leadership theories

The Feminist Theory that structural inequalities and gender norms shape women’s career trajectories is also supported by the findings of the study. A model that allows for an understanding of how traditional gender expectations may play out in the workplace is Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood 1991). In this theory men tend to represent the attributes of leadership—dominance and rationality, and women fit to the attributes of nurturing and communalism. These stereotypes lead to the persistent under representation of women in executive ranks partly by continuing to reinforce the idea that leadership is a male domain.

Moreover, Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) describes how women in leadership posts receive bias because they are perceived as behaving in conflict with traditional female roles when they take on leadership roles. This double binds women: if they abide by traditional gender norms they’re viewed as too soft, and not fit to lead. Still, if they seem to be assertive or decisive, they will come across as aggressive or unlikable. This challenge makes succeeding at your career progression difficult for women without some degree of pushback.

In addition, Transformational Leadership Theory is found to be relevant in promoting gender inclusivity. Transformational leaders are able to stimulate and encourage teams to collaborate around a shared vision and experience personal development. However, women who take up this leadership style create an atmosphere free of stereotypes, which presents a challenge to male dominant workplace cultures. Research indicates that companies with a larger proportion of female leaders are more likely to utilise inclusive leadership practices that enhance firm performance in general (Kark & Shamir, 2002). What this implies is that including more women in leadership is not only about having equal rights, but also equals to the strategic advantage of businesses.

In addition, Career Resilience Theory offers insights related to how women traverse systemic barriers to career advancement. Women whose leadership transition is successful appear to be adaptable, persistent, and employ proactive career strategies. According to the study a lot of female leaders have found creative ways of making it through mentorship, continuous training and networking to overcoming their challenges in work stations. Although resilience is a key attribute for career success, it is not enough to expect women to rely on their individual efforts to overcome gender biases.

6.3.3 Systemic challenges beyond the workplace

There have been organisational barriers that impede women's career pathways, but more than that, factors that are further afield, in terms of the society and the systems within which they operate, have continued to impinge on women's career trajectories. In this study, the unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities is one of the most important challenges. While gender equality at the workplace has come a long way, women still bear more than their fair share of the caregiving and household duties. Consequently, their ability to participate fully in career progression opportunities is affected especially in demanding industries like manufacturing. Maternity related career breaks or reduced availability to participate in long hours or after hour networking and leadership development activities; resulting in many women experiencing stagnation in their careers.

Other factors crucial to shaping career progression include education. Although the access to education by women has improved, leadership training and the professional development programmes are yet to reach parity. Women working in male predominantly industries seldom come in contact with good leadership role models and opportunities for career advancements. This means targeted educational reforms that motivate women to follow leadership paths from an early age are essential to those looking to be promoted to positions of leadership in their organisations. Building a stronger pipeline for female executives can come with encouraging young women to enter STEM fields and leadership training at the university level.

The second systemic challenge is the way the society perceives female leadership. Culturally, stereotypes continue to exist which link leadership with masculinity, and media representations are no exception. There often comes more levels of scrutiny and criticism for women in executive roles than for men. For example, while women are able to achieve

senior positions, the research shows that they frequently run into obstacles like being kept out of the informal networks of power or being expected to perform higher as compared to their male counterparts. These biases continue to sustain the 'glass ceiling' effect that restricts women's rise into the most senior leadership positions.

6.3.4 Moving forward: Recommendations for change

To support the meaning of gender equity in practice, organisations must take a more holistic approach. The following are some recommendations to make the leadership landscape more inclusive.

1. **Achieving gender equity policies** – improving enforcement of accountability mechanisms to support that diversity policies translate into measures. As such, companies should set clear targets for the representation of female leadership and track that progress over time.
2. **Expanding mentorship and sponsorship** - structured mentorship programs matched junior female leaders to a senior executive in their disciplines. There should also be sponsorship programs to enable women to have direct career advancement opportunities.
3. **Unconscious bias** – this requires that organisations provide unconscious bias training to their managers and executives in order to challenge stereotypes and help promote the ability to make inclusive decisions.
4. **Improving effectiveness of nonwork** – developing flexible work arrangements, parental leave policies, and leadership pathways that mesh with caregiving responsibilities. Ideally, companies should understand that considerations of work-life balance policy is not meant only for women, but also for men that will result in increased productivity.
5. **Enabling women**- to create their leadership pipelines by encouraging participation in leadership training, executive development programmes and attend industry networking opportunities. Becoming exposed to early career leadership is essential for long-term success.
6. **Female role models** - are needed in business, media and even in public discourse – one must normalise female leadership and hence only the organisations and policymakers can change the way of the society from believing that only men can lead. Breaking some gender stereotypes can come by representing that in films.

Using these strategies, organisations are able to shift away from performing diversity and create lasting pipelines for women to be successful in senior leadership positions. Being a social responsibility, the issue of achieving gender parity in leadership is also an economic and business imperative. This research's findings indicate that despite centuries of systemic barriers, targeted interventions can enable us to dismantle those hindrances and create a more inclusive leadership environment.

6.4 Implications for policy and practice

No single or partial approach can achieve the equity goal with respect to gender in top leadership positions. This research shows that targeted strategies need to be promoted to promote women's career progression in South African manufacturing. Policies that nurture gender equality have been put in place to ensure women are encouraged to apply for senior management roles, but there are still systemic barriers women have to overcome to ensure they gain senior management roles. Policymakers, organisational leaders, and key industry stakeholders will find key implications for driving sustainable change in this section.

6.4.1 Practical recommendations for organisations

Organisations need to have structured policies and cultural shifts that encourage an environment conducive to women's career advancement through counteraction of overt and implicit biases. Meaningful progress can be facilitated by the following recommendations.

1. Organisations should have structured leadership training aimed specifically at women in the middle of their careers. These programmes should be tailored to build skills, provide executive coaching and networking opportunities, leading to the development of women' confidence and competence to be eligible for senior roles.
2. Encourage formal or informal programmes like mentorship and sponsorship initiation. The one who is sponsored by senior leaders is more likely to be promoted and be visible in the organisation. In order to ensure that all employees have the possibility to develop their careers, these programmes should be institutionalised within organisations.

3. Gender bias, both overt and subconscious are part of the world every day. This, in addition causes bias in promotion and hiring. Training managers and employees on the impact of biases and how to counter them therefore has to be mandatory in the organisations.
4. Caregiving responsibilities often result in a woman's career interruption. Flexible work arrangements including remote work; job sharing, and extended parental leave, may facilitate women's career continuity in the presence of family obligations.
5. Design of promotion and pay structures. Clearly defined, merit-based promotion criteria and clear pay policies diminish the gender differences in the advancement of their career. But regular audits should be carried out to see whether there are gaps in wages and whether leaders should be given equal opportunities.

Workplace cultures that prefer male, as opposed to female, networking and decision-making structures disadvantage women. For organisations to have inclusive work environments, hiring panels must be diversified, leadership teams should be equally in gender composition, and inclusive decision-making practises should be promoted.

6.4.2 Industry-specific strategies for manufacturing

In particular, the male culture of the manufacturing sector offers unique challenges for women's career progression. Gender specificities in this business sector call for strategic interventions including:

1. The South African government and industry regulators should introduce incentives to companies who achieve gender diversity targets at senior leadership. Organisations might be encouraged to enhance diversity in the work place with tax breaks, funding opportunities, public recognition, etc.
2. Women continue to be underrepresented in the leadership of the manufacturing industry partly because women's talent is not entering technical fields at a high enough level. Industry should partner with the institutions that help to make educational programmes more attractive to women pursuing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) careers so that we can fill the gap in the skills that we need.
3. Manufacturing jobs are often physically demanding and are in male dominated jobs so some women may end up being harassed or excluded from the workplace.

There should be strict anti-harassment policies that should be enforced by the companies, gender sensitive training should be provided to employees and the working conditions should be ensured to be safe.

4. Female employees in the manufacturing industry are mainly placed in Admin or HR roles and not in operational leaders as the norm. In order to reach gender diversity goals, companies must actually recruit, train, and promote women into technical and managerial roles that defy traditional gender norms within their sector.

6.4.3 Proposed interventions for sustainable gender equity

To influence long-term gender equity at the level of senior leadership will require sustained programme interventions in both the policy and organisational levels. Key strategies include:

1. While South Africa has already progressive gender equality laws, enforcement is uneven. Important ways to strengthen policy implementation through accountability measures, reporting regular basis and imposing penalties for non-compliance are creating state contingency plans.
2. Implementing mandatory gender quotas on senior leadership roles in big corporations can help speed up women's representation. Although controversial, research shows that quota systems eliminate gender disparity in the long run.
3. Policies must consider the intersectionality of race, socio-economic background and gender in their approach to gender equity. Women from marginalised communities need to deal with multiple layers of discrimination and therefore need tailored interventions to address multiple compounded barriers.
4. Collaboration between government agencies, association of private leaders, NGO's and advocacy organisations can facilitate systemic changes. Leadership summits, industry roundtables, and cross sector mentor programmes are all ways women's advancement can be addressed through initiatives.
5. Continuous monitoring of gender equity trends in a Longitudinal Research. Policymakers and industry leaders should fund research on how women progress in the profession by following their career; identify persistent barriers; and test the effectiveness of different interventions over a longer period to better identify trends.
6. Cultural and societal shifts are needed to break the glass ceiling, however, the attitudes towards women in leadership in the society must change beyond

workplace policies. Changing perceptions is something that media representation, education campaigns, and grassroots advocacy could contribute to, for instance, bringing the traditions of these industries closer to normalising female leadership in these sectors.

6.5 Conclusion

This study's findings demonstrate the persistent challenges, but equally present opportunities for effective change in women's career advancement in South Africa's manufacturing sector. Stakeholders can create fair working environment for women to advance their leadership through implementing industry specific intervention, persistent policy reform and targeted organisation strategy. Getting to gender parity in senior management is not only a matter of morality or social obligation but in fact business imperative to tapping into diverse views, fuel more innovations, and ultimately better the performance of an organisation.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the main study findings are synthesized by articulating the broader significance of studying gender dynamics in South Africa's manufacturing sector. The aim of the research was to identify the enablers and barriers that affect women's transition from middle to senior management in a masculine dominated industry. This study examines organisational practices as well as socio-cultural influences in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how gender disparities persist despite progressive policies. In the process, it serves the purposes of contributing to academic debate on gender and leadership and providing practical recommendations to organisations wishing to improve diversity and inclusion at an executive level.

This research is timely in that it examines systemic challenges to female leadership in specific instances where women continuously lead in the context of their fields. Women in South Africa continue to be disproportionately represented in senior management positions and these persistent barriers that women face are further challenged by historical legacies of inequalities and contemporary organisational cultures. As the study focuses on the manufacturing sector, which forms an important pillar in the national economy, it makes its premises and relevant to policy, business and scholarly audiences. The investigation further explores qualitative aspects of workplace bias, mentorship inadequacy, and other cultural norms rooted in professional career advancement in this context.

Overall, the chapter illustrates the study's contribution by bringing together empirical evidence and theoretical insights. It highlights how an understanding of gender dynamics can inform powerful practices and policy reforms. This chapter makes the case for and calls for strategic interventions across both overt and subtle barriers by means of a detailed discussion of findings and recommendations. This is done in order to reinforce the necessity of a holistic approach that includes the development of leaders, network of support, and inclusive organisational cultures. Thus, this closing chapter ties the research's objectives, context, and outcomes together to form a coherent narrative for the next stage of inquiry and practical action.

7.2 Research context and rationale

The context for the research is South Africa's manufacturing sector, a dynamic and challenging environment where historical legacies as well as enduring gender biases continue to influence leadership trajectories. Senior management comprise of predominantly males which form part of this industry that contributes a significant portion of the South African GDP. Structural inequities that have severely limited women's access to decision-making roles for decades, which resulted from apartheid era policies, are a defining context. Although they are quite aware of progressive government initiatives and increasingly advanced employment equity policies, this sector can be a tough battlefield for reaching gender parity.

Career progression is highly dependent on socio-cultural factors. Changes in education and policy over the years haven't stopped deep rooted gender stereotypes to prevail that leadership corresponds to traits considered male at their essence. Women also face additional difficulties, beyond economic pressures, because of familial expectations and lack of access to professional networks. In this context, organisations find it challenging to put an effective diversity strategy in place, and the progress of female talent into senior positions is slow.

Therefore, the research setting of this study is significant in advancing the field's understanding of these challenges because it encompasses the convergence of the policy, culture, and economic related imperatives. Thus, within the generic theme of global trends meeting local realities, the study concentrates on the manufacturing sector. The research is built on the need to go beyond statistical representation in order to examine what organisational practices and societal norms sustain gender imbalances. This enables targeted interventions and policy reforms in doing so. The findings of the study help to enrich the understanding of how gender dynamics manifest themselves in traditional industries with high stakes, and highlight the importance of evidence-based strategic initiatives for enriching leadership inclusiveness.

7.3 Synthesis of existing knowledge and identified gaps

A body of literature exists on women's career progression over the past decades that describes the critical enablers (i.e., mentorship, leadership development, and flexibility in

work practices) and pervasive barriers (i.e., inflexible workplace norms, intuitive stereotypes, and the glass ceiling cap to women's advancement). Not earlier than in the early 2000s, numerous studies demonstrated that while women are entering the workforce and even attaining necessary professional qualifications, they are still vastly underrepresented among those in higher positions at top leadership, especially. Based on research conducted in the various contexts such as corporate, academic and governmental sectors there have existed systemic biases that disadvantage women professionals in male dominated industries.

While these advances have occurred, there are still gaps. Most previous studies have been confined to individual regions or sectors or have concerned quantitative representation. In this particular case, there is a dearth of qualitative understanding of the rich specificities of South African women's lives within South Africa's manufacturing sectors, an area that combines both rapid economic change and entrenched cultural traditions. On top of this, though individual factors that influence career progress have been widely studied by many researchers, there has been limited work projecting links between practices of organisations and larger socio-cultural influences.

These gaps are addressed in terms of a present study by infusing empirical evidence from in-depth interviews with a strong theoretical framework focusing on role congruity and career resilience. It can explain not only what is known of women's leadership challenges, but questions the limits of existing research. By doing so, the study adds to existing knowledge of how policy measures, organisational cultures and individual agency interact with each other. In addition to placing the research within the wider scholarly debate, this synthesis helps pointing the way to practical solutions that are needed to close that gap between theory and practice. The study meets the identified gaps by directly responding to them, thus offering a new perspective on gender dynamics in a crucial economic sector, and establishing future research and policy reform.

7.4 Study focus and methodological framework

The main objective of the study was to find out the factors that facilitate women to progress from middle to senior management in South Africa's manufacturing sector. More specifically, it tried to gain insights on how the dynamics between organisational practices and cultural norms as well as how individual resilience interacted to affect career

trajectories. The research adopts a qualitative approach using in depth interviews with senior women executives in the various manufacturing firms to achieve this. These interviews sought to obtain the lived experiences and perceptions of women who had to function in an area that is traditionally a male dominated field.

The results of this study are based on data, collected using a semi-structured interview format, that gave participants the flexibility to highlight personal and professional challenges of their own choosing as well as ensuring a systematic exploration of key themes such as mentorship, work-life balance and gender bias. After having analysed transcripts with NVivo software, which facilitated a rigorous coding process of the transcripts that uncovered recurring themes and patterns on various organisational levels. Such methodological framework guaranteed that the analysis was comprehensive and based upon real participants' world experiences.

Furthermore, theoretical perspectives such as role congruity theory and career resilience theory were interpreted in order to understand the findings. The frameworks offered a framework to explore how expectations in a society and within an organisation itself shapes movement into a career. Tracing through extant literature along with data drawn from interviews, the study managed to create a nuanced appreciation of the complexity of this problem. The methodology design for this inquiry was designed to guarantee validity and reliability in addition to providing a thorough knowledge of the mechanisms by which gendered organisational practices impede women's leadership advancement. It was systematically and iteratively parted such that relevant insights are found for academia as well as industry.

7.5 Key findings and their interpretation

Several critical findings emerged that explain the barriers and enablers, from the multifaceted perspectives that are affecting women's career progression in the manufacturing sector. Even more essential were the effective mentorship and sponsorship programs, targeted leadership development initiatives, and flexible work policies put in place. Supportive networks and the visibility of female role models were always mentioned as important by the participants in the building of confidence and opening pathways to senior management roles. Though, these enablers were mostly negated by wide spread challenges.

The key barriers were entrenched gender stereotypes, the enduring 'glass ceiling' effect, and very male traditional leadership practices in organisations. Most respondents were qualified and used to deliver good results, but women were often overlooked when it came to promotion, in part due to implicit biases and undervaluation of women's contributions. In addition, the study showed that being placed under work-life balance challenges, including the ones associated with family responsibilities, made these hurdles worse for women who had to face not only professional problems but also problems pertaining to personal dimensions.

Interpretively, these findings suggest that although the representation overall has been improving gradually through policy reform and increased awareness, systemic and cultural factors still restrict progress. These data show that resilience at the individual level, in interaction with organisational support, are necessary to overcome these barriers. This included emphasising transformational leadership practices as a promising avenue for overcoming the convention and supporting the creation of an inclusive environment. All in all, the results indicate that the improvement is feasible if it evolves from the converged outputs of both structural impediments and interpersonal biases. Combining efforts to improve supportive practices and actively smashing through discriminatory barriers marks a path for long term goals for gender size in leadership in manufacturing.

7.6 Contributions to scholarship

This research contributes to scholarly debate by integrating theoretical frameworks, role congruity and career resilience, with empirical insights from a South African manufacturing context. The study bridges qualitative data with existing literature and this bridge provides a thorough understanding of the many complex challenges that lead to the hinderance of female leadership progression. Drawing on an ethnographic and critical case study, it explains how practices within organisations and individuals' preferences intersect with culture, all of which contribute to shaping career trajectories; an unmet need in the literature. Structural reforms will not work without accompanying cultural shifts and strong supporting mechanisms, as the findings put the current belief that structural reforms are enough on trial. In addition, the research offers new evidence regarding when mentorship and flexible work policies can help offset gender disparities and what alternative explanations for gender disparities may be unproductive; such perspectives are valuable for future theoretical development and empirical testing. The study contributes to the

academic discourse concerning the issues of gender and leadership and delivers a fine model that inspires future studies on a similar scale.

7.7 Practical and business implications

The study's insights have significant practical implications for organisations and policymakers aiming to foster gender diversity in leadership. Companies operating in the manufacturing sector are encouraged to develop targeted leadership development programs and mentorship initiatives specifically tailored for female professionals. By instituting diversity quotas and flexible work arrangements, organisations can create an inclusive environment that supports both professional advancement and personal responsibilities. Additionally, businesses are urged to implement regular monitoring of promotion rates and retention metrics to assess the effectiveness of these interventions. For policymakers, the findings highlight the need for stronger regulatory frameworks that not only mandate equal opportunity but also incentivise the adoption of best practices in diversity and inclusion. The evidence presented suggests that actionable change can be driven by a dual approach: reforming internal organisational cultures while also enacting supportive public policies. Such combined efforts are essential to breaking down the structural and cultural barriers that continue to impede women's progress in leadership roles.

7.8 Limitations and future research directions

7.8.1 Methodological limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the enablers and barriers to women's career progression in the South African manufacturing sector, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. One significant limitation is the lack of participant diversity. The study primarily relied on a sample that did not fully capture the experiences of women from various socio-economic backgrounds, racial groups, and educational levels. As a result, the findings may not be wholly representative of the broader population of women in manufacturing leadership. Future studies should strive for greater inclusivity by ensuring a more diverse participant pool that accounts for varying perspectives and experiences. Another methodological constraint is the reliance on self-reported data. While qualitative interviews and surveys provide rich, first-hand insights into participants' experiences, self-reported data may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. Some participants

may have downplayed or exaggerated their experiences based on personal perceptions or external pressures. Future research could mitigate this limitation by incorporating observational methods, longitudinal studies, or organisational data analysis to provide a more comprehensive and objective assessment of career progression dynamics.

Additionally, the study focused primarily on the manufacturing industry, which, while critical, represents only one segment of the workforce. The unique challenges faced by women in manufacturing may not be entirely generalisable to other industries, such as finance, healthcare, or technology, where gender dynamics and leadership opportunities may differ. Comparative studies across multiple industries could provide a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing women's career advancement in different professional settings.

7.8.2 Future research directions

Building on the findings of this study, future research can explore several key areas to enhance understanding and drive more effective interventions for gender equity in leadership.

7.8.3 Intersectionality in career progression

While this study highlights gender-related barriers, future research should adopt an intersectional approach to examine how multiple factors—such as race, ethnicity, age, disability, and socio-economic status—interact to shape women's career trajectories. Women from historically marginalized communities may face compounded barriers that are not adequately addressed by general gender equity initiatives. Investigating these overlapping challenges would provide deeper insights into how different groups of women experience career progression and identify more targeted solutions.

7.8.4 Longitudinal studies on career advancement

A critical gap in existing research is the long-term impact of gender equity policies and interventions. Future studies should track women's career progression over extended periods to assess whether mentorship programs, leadership training, and diversity policies

lead to sustained improvements in leadership representation. A longitudinal approach would help determine whether current initiatives result in lasting change or if additional strategies are needed to ensure continuous advancement for women in leadership.

7.8.4 Impact of organisational culture on gender equity

Future research should explore how corporate culture influences gender dynamics in leadership. While policies promoting gender diversity exist, the degree to which they are embraced within organisational cultures varies significantly. Examining case studies of companies that have successfully integrated gender equity into their corporate ethos could provide valuable lessons on best practices for fostering inclusive work environments.

7.8.5 Men's role in gender equity effort

Gender diversity in leadership is not solely a women's issue—it requires active engagement from men as well. Future studies could investigate how male allies, senior executives, and industry leaders can contribute to breaking down systemic barriers. Understanding how men perceive and engage with gender diversity initiatives could help design more effective interventions that create inclusive leadership pathways for all employees.

7.8.6 The role of policy implementation and enforcement

While gender equity policies exist at both national and corporate levels, enforcement remains inconsistent. Future research should assess the effectiveness of gender quotas, affirmative action policies, and workplace diversity initiatives in South Africa's manufacturing sector and beyond. Understanding the gaps between policy design and implementation would provide valuable recommendations for strengthening accountability mechanisms and ensuring that gender equity commitments translate into real progress.

Despite its limitations, this study contributes valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities surrounding women's career progression in the manufacturing sector. Future research should focus on broadening participant diversity, adopting intersectional frameworks, and assessing the long-term effectiveness of gender equity initiatives. By addressing these gaps, researchers, policymakers, and organisations can develop more

inclusive and sustainable strategies that foster greater gender diversity in leadership and create equitable workplaces for future generations.

7.9 Final synthesis and concluding thoughts

In summary, this study provides a robust examination of the enablers and barriers that shape women's progression in South Africa's manufacturing sector. By integrating empirical insights with established theoretical frameworks, the research highlights both the challenges inherent in traditional organisational cultures and the transformative potential of targeted support initiatives. The findings underscore the necessity of coordinated efforts—combining policy reform, organisational change, and individual resilience—to achieve sustainable gender parity in leadership. As organisations and policymakers work to dismantle persistent biases and create inclusive environments, the study serves as both a call to action and a guide for future interventions. Ultimately, the research not only contributes to academic scholarship but also offers practical solutions that can drive real-world change, paving the way for a more equitable and dynamic leadership landscape.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

Interview Guide

Introduction:

Briefly introduce yourself and the purpose of the study.

Explain the confidentiality and anonymity of the responses.

Obtain verbal consent to proceed with the interview and tell them you will be recording

Section 1: General Background

1. Can you describe your current role in the manufacturing sector?
2. How long have you been in your current position?
3. What has your career progression looked like up to this point?

Section 2: Enablers of Progression (Related to RQ1)

4. What helped you progress from middle management to your current role?
5. Can you identify specific policies or initiatives within your organization that have supported your career advancement?
6. How these opportunities influenced your career progression?

Section 3: Barriers to Progression (Related to RQ2)

7. What challenges or barriers have you encountered while trying to advance from middle management to senior management?
8. Can you describe any organizational or industry-wide obstacles that have hindered your progression?
9. How do you perceive the role of gender bias in your career advancement within the manufacturing sector?
10. Have you experienced any limitations in terms of work-life balance that have affected your career progression?
11. How does the corporate culture in your organization impact women's career advancement?

Section 4: Navigating Career Progression (Related to RQ3)

12. What strategies have you employed to overcome barriers and navigate your career progression?
13. Can you share any specific examples where you successfully addressed challenges in your career path?
14. What advice would you give to other women aiming to progress to senior management roles in this sector?
15. How do you maintain resilience and motivation in the face of obstacles?
16. What role do professional development and continuous learning play in your career advancement?
17. Are there any additional resources or support systems that have been particularly helpful in your career?

End:

Ask if they have any additional comments or suggestions.

Thank the participant for their time and insights.

Reaffirm contact details if they have any follow up questions or information to share

Appendix 2: Consent form

Gordon Institute of Business Science

University of Pretoria

To Whom It May Concern

Consent Letter

I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA.

I am researching the enablers and barriers to the career progression of women into senior management positions in the South African manufacturing sector. To contribute to a nuanced understanding and uncover the current barriers to female career progression into senior leadership positions and what the current enablers have emerged that support female career progression.

I would like an opportunity to interview you regarding this topic. This interview should last about an hour. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any given time without penalty. All data will be reported without identifiers (anonymity) and strictly confidential. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or myself. Our contact details are provided below.

Researcher name:

Research Supervisor Name:

Email:

Email:

Phone:

Phone:

Signature of participant:

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date:
