

Research Report Title

**The lived experiences of African and Coloured women in top management
and their contribution to organisational strategic decision-making in South
African organisations**

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science,
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degree of Master of Business Administration.

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Abstract

Despite the progress women of colour in South Africa have made in being represented in top management, African and Coloured women remain underrepresented in most senior parts of their organisations. With that in mind, what is still unclear is what happens with women of colour when they have reached top management, and how they are involved in critical decisions within their organisations. Understanding their lived experiences through the lens of intersectionality and role congruency theory gives insights into what these experiences look like and whether the idea of tokenism persists in corporate South Africa at that level. The main elements of focus concerning their roles are the intersection of race and gender, together with their leadership level, and examining what role they play in strategic decision-making in their organisations. This study examines how African and Coloured women are engaged in the process of strategic decision-making in their organisations. Through interviews, data was gathered that answered the question, confirming that they are involved in this process of strategic decision-making. Even with this outcome, they still face barriers in their roles as senior leaders, with their organisations committed to the cause of accelerating women in leadership roles.

Keywords:

Women of colour, Decision-making, Intersectionality, Role Congruency Theory,
Top management

Plagiarism Declaration

I declare that this research project is my work. It was 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.

23992124

04 November 2024

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction of Research

Leaders at top management play a critical role in providing strategic direction, decision-making, leadership, and resource allocation, amongst other pivotal activities (Song et al., 2024). Their role and intention as strategic leaders are to ensure several key functions such as making strategic decisions, engaging stakeholders, effectively using and motivating their people, and their organisations' overall strategic execution (Samimi et al., 2022). The reality is that white women and women of colour continue to face barriers in their progression to leadership positions, which some have successfully overcome (Glass & Cook, 2020).

Yet the underrepresentation of African and Coloured women in organisations at top management in South Africa remains a topical issue. Consequently, the limited representation of African and Coloured women invariably limits their participation in organisations and hinders their efforts in providing strategic direction. Crossan et al. (2008) state that strategic leadership has two parts: leadership in the organisation, as a leader, and the second element focusing on the organisation's leadership. The premise of this paper will focus on the leadership on women of colour as leaders in their organisations.

In South Africa, this remains a reality that organisations must deal with, making the underrepresentation of women (KPMG Women in Leadership, 2023), and African and Coloured women remain rife in organisations. Consequently, the limited representation of African and Coloured women invariably limits their participation in organisations and hinders their efforts in providing strategic direction. Crossan et al. (2008) state that strategic leadership has two parts: leadership in the organisation as a leader and the second element focusing on the organisation's leadership. The foundation of this paper will focus on the leadership on women of colour as leaders in their organisations.

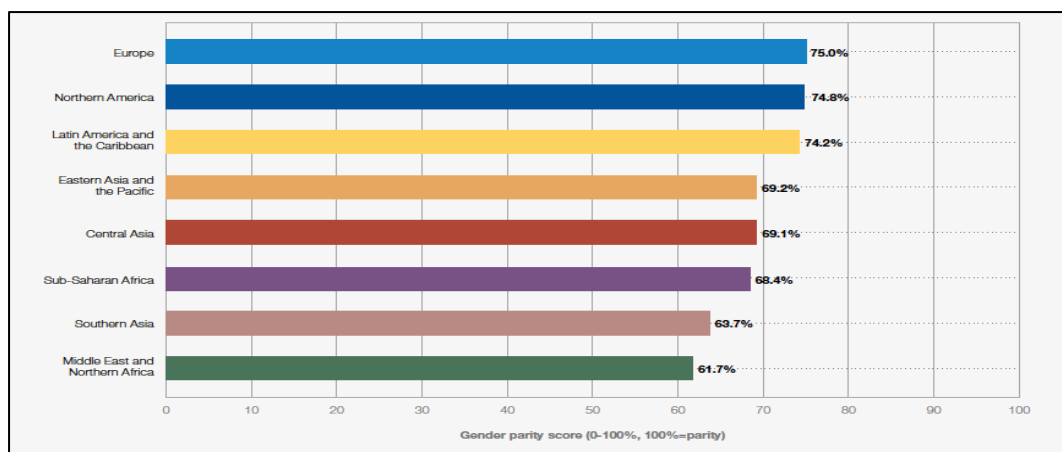
The following chapter commences with a background of the study that presents a foundation for the research topic, by providing an overview of the area that will be researched. Following on, specifics related to the problem statement will be

addressed, followed by the purpose statement, highlighting the focus of the study. The next part will then look at the aims of the study. A brief view of the research questions will be touched on, and details of the research questions will be covered in chapter three (3). Thereafter, the significance of this research will be explained, justifying its value, adding to the business need for the study, and the theoretical need for the study. Afterwards, the study will address the research methodology, and the limitations will be outlined briefly, leading to the conclusion. The final parts of the introduction will close off with the paper's outline and a chapter summary.

1.2 Background of the study

Although evidence points to tangible progress in women's representation in leadership positions – see **Figure 1.1: Global Gap Closure Rate**, the literature reveals that the underrepresentation of women in most parts of society remains an issue. This issue shows that “women's representation in positions of power and influence has been notably less impressive” (Ryan et al., 2016, p.446). Research and data show that diverse workforces that include gender diversity are likely to outperform their competitors, yet the occupancy rate of female leaders in organisations has slowed down (Hoobler et al., 2018). Studies have shown that women are successful in leadership roles but hold fewer senior leadership roles than men (Sánchez & Lehnert, 2019). Five years after this study, The Grant Thornton Women in Business report (2023) highlights the same challenge and confirms that this progress has lagged and even slowed.

Figure 1.1: Global Gender Closure Rate



Source: World Economic Forum (WEF), Global Gender Gap 2024

The persistence of inequalities today does not only show itself in the representation of women but in the sparse representation of women of colour. The underrepresentation of women of ethnic minorities in 'prestigious' roles remains an issue (Rivera, 2020). As expected, this trend has transcended to ethnic minorities, where studies on minorities in management remain limited, noting that "little research has extended or built on this groundbreaking work on Black women professionals, despite evidence of their strong desire to ascend the corporate ladder and become influential leaders" (Smith et al., 2019, p. 1706). This is evidence that the 'herstory' has not yet found itself in the boardroom or academics; therefore, we can only infer its lack of importance. As such the focus on this study will be on Women of Colour in a non-Western or European context, but a South African context, the experiences of women in corporate.

1.2.1 Grounding theories for research

The fundamental theories that underpin this research are twofold, namely, the role congruency theory (RCT) (Ealy & Karau, 2002) and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989). As a matter of linking women of colour and leadership to this theory, RCT helps juxtapose, highlighting the incongruencies of women in leadership roles and unpack what this has meant for them in organisations. As a theory, RCT helps to understand why the contradictions that exist for women have created barriers in leadership spaces. Koburtay et al. (2019) explain that women are not seen as leaders naturally; therefore, they do not 'belong' in roles that are preferred to be occupied by males. More importantly, RCT provides a nexus that demonstrates how it "is rooted in social role theory, which focuses on the congruency between gender and leadership roles" (Wang et al., 2019, p.747). These roles are preconceived in traditional characteristics of men and women and define that roles they should hold (Wang et al., 2019) in society.

Intersectionality, on the other hand, focuses on the experiences of women of colour in organisations based on the incongruence of their roles in organisations. Intersectionality, which is derived from the intersections of multiple constructs, where Crenshaw (1989) established that women's colour cannot be understood and dealt with as one single identity, but rather acknowledge that their race (black), and gender

(female), affect how they experience organisations (Rosette et al., 2018), which usually result in them the experiencing marginalisation in the workplace. Kaufman (2023, p.7) expands on this, showing “how multiple forms of social inequality interact to produce individuals’ unique experiences of marginalisation, [...] and the systemic practices that perpetuate these inequalities”, is what intersectionality focuses on. Thus, intersectionality is anchored on two perspectives that interact (intersect), specifically for women of colour in employment settings (Hopkins, 2019). As such, from Crenshaws’ seminal works on intersectionality, recent developments of this theory have since aimed to bridge the gap in the limited studies on Black women, specifically in the workplace (Smith et al., 2019). Notwithstanding, further developments on intersectionality reveal that power is now drawn from multiple sources with Kwon and Archer (2022, p.340),

“Intersectionality is often misconstrued as holding multiple identities rather than examining where multiple systems of oppression simultaneously (and sometimes intricately) create compounded effects (Crenshaw, 1989). Through an intersectional lens, different powerful systems will interlock and affect different people in discrete ways”.

It is this theoretical framing and background that will assist in capturing the protagonist of the study – women of colour in South Africa and apply those two theories contextually to understand their lived experiences in top management better.

1.2.2 South African Context and Scope of Study

In South Africa, women of colour are the most marginalised group in the workplace (Ramohai, 2019), which is the basis of this study. As such, transformation for women of colour in corporate South Africa, although progressing (KPMG, 2023), can be described as a challenge aligned with global trends (KPMG). This being the case, the Employment Equity Act (EEA) (Act No.55 of 1998) was promulgated to promote the equal treatment of people regardless of their intersections – race, gender, and sexual orientation (CEM, 2023). This Act set out, with other legislative measures, to help redress equality in the workplace (Bosch et al., 2020) for those previously

disadvantaged and enhance opportunities in corporate South Africa and help with becoming active participants in the economy.

The economically active population (EAP) in 2023 showed that 41 per cent – see **Figure 1.2** National Economic Active Population by Gender, are African and Coloured females participating in the South African economy (CEM, 2023). On the other side of that – see **Figure 1.3** Representation at Top Management: Gender and Race, the representation of women of colour in top management, excluding Indians, does not meet the EAP classification across business types (CEM, 2023). Top management representation by race however, the inverse is true for the public sector (CEM 2023). To illustrate this gap and the need for that study, 62 per cent of top management positions in 2023 – 2024 were held by less than 8 per cent of the EAP (CEM 2023). These are remnants of the previous government regime that created inequalities that can be seen today in employment sectors, types of employment and wage gaps (Gradín, 2021).

Figure 1.2: National Economic Active Population by Gender

Table 1: National EAP by Population Group and Gender* (*Source: Statistics South Africa. QLFS. Quarter 3, 2023)						
MALE			FEMALE			TOTAL
AM	African Male	43.1%	AF	African Female	37.6%	80.7%
CM	Coloured Male	4.8%	CF	Coloured Female	4.2%	9.0%
IM	Indian Male	1.6%	IF	Indian Female	1.0%	2.6%
WM	White Male	4.2%	WF	White Female	3.5%	7.7%
TOTAL		53.7%			46.3%	100.0%

Source: CEM 2023/24

By design of South Africa’s population group is analysed in four groups – black Africans, Coloureds, Indians or Asian and White people, where the majority being black Africans (<80%) and Indian/Asian people (>3%), which is not reflective of the workplace (Wärnich et al., 2018). Although Indians/Asians are considered as the marginalised group by Department of Labour (DOL) standards, and while crucial we acknowledge the plight of their marginalisation due to the past, data shows that black African and Coloured females necessitate a larger platform to address this issue, whereas Indians and Asians in relation to the EAP are overrepresented, and therefore out of scope for this study. Therefore, this study will on focus on the advent

experiences of black African and Coloured women (hereafter referred to as women of colour in for the South African context only) in South Africa in top management.

Figure 1.3: Representation at Top Management: Gender and Race

Table 8: Workforce profile at the Top Management level by Business Type, Population Group and Gender											
BUSINESS TYPE	Male				Female				Foreign National		TOTAL
	AM	CM	IM	WM	AF	CF	IF	WF	FM	FF	
EAP	43,1%	4,8%	1,3%	4,2%	37,6%	4,2%	1,0%	3,5%	NA	NA	100%
National Government	43,1%	4,0%	2,9%	5,6%	33,6%	2,9%	4,2%	3,4%	0,3%	0,0%	100,0%
Provincial Government	48,4%	6,4%	3,5%	3,2%	30,3%	3,5%	2,2%	1,9%	0,3%	0,3%	100,0%
Local Government	50,1%	9,9%	2,8%	6,5%	22,3%	3,9%	1,0%	3,6%	0,0%	0,0%	100,0%
Private Sector	8,5%	3,5%	8,0%	51,8%	5,5%	2,4%	4,0%	13,3%	2,4%	0,5%	100,0%
Non-Profit Organisations	24,6%	5,4%	4,2%	20,8%	15,7%	3,6%	3,4%	16,7%	3,7%	1,8%	100,0%
State Owned Enterprises	38,4%	3,9%	5,7%	9,0%	27,7%	4,0%	3,5%	6,6%	0,9%	0,4%	100,0%
Educational Institutions	14,9%	3,7%	4,6%	27,5%	9,6%	4,0%	4,2%	28,0%	2,7%	0,8%	100,0%

1.3 Research problem

Much research has been done on the ascension of women to leadership roles, the plethora of challenges they have encountered, and ultimately, their underrepresentation in top management. Terms such as ‘glass-ceiling’ were first used in 1986 by Hymowitz and Schellhardt and later adopted by Morison, White and Velsor, who futuristically titled their book – *Breaking the Glass Ceiling – Can Women Reach the Top of America’s Largest Corporations* (Sabharwal, 2013). Almost forty years later, the glass ceiling remains topical and relevant for women worldwide and across industries, who face complexities in these roles once they have cracked the ‘entry’ code. This is a problem because this issue continues to be highlighted with little to no movement globally, which has far-reaching impacts.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are a collective of issues formed by United Nation (UN) states in 2015 to address pressing issues faced across the world, where foreign strategies and political decision-making have influenced UN Member states to call for action in the promotion of these goals (Moyer and Hedden, 2019). The global objectives press on 17 goals that need to be achieved by 2030. SDG Five (5) – Gender Equality, focuses on ending discriminatory practices against women and girls by empowering them to impact economic growth and development (UNDP, 2021). Of

particular interest, SDG 5.5 pays attention to the problem that requires solving, ensuring that “women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life” (UN Women, 2024).

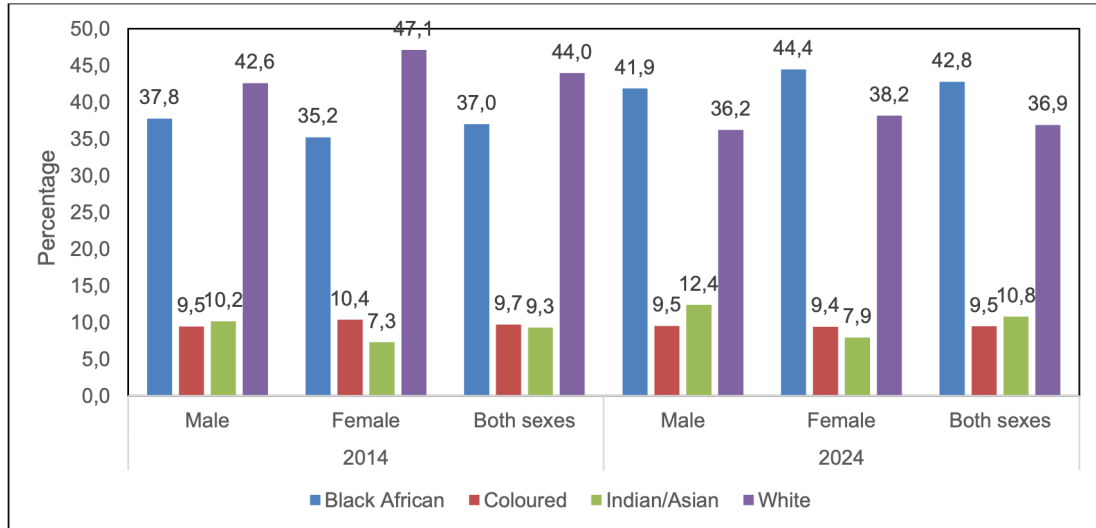
Although there is improvement in the promotion and, ultimately, representation of women in senior leadership by 1,1 per cent, gender parity at this level will only be achieved by 2053, should there be no greater effort to accelerate this issue (Grant Thornton, 2024). Therefore, the lack of gender representation at top management, and where organisations have not had a “critical mass” of women in top management teams, research related to the effects of gender diversity have been limited to investigations” (Triana et al., 2019, p.1681). This goes to show that this is indeed a problem; with little research on the matter, it becomes hard to solve a problem of this magnitude, and in a South African context, where literature, as noted, is already limited.

Amayah and Haque (2017) point out that most research on women in leadership has been done in a Western and European context, so it is not entirely generalisable, considering cultural contexts. Furthermore, “from an African context, until recently, there has been limited research on leadership in Africa (Abebe et al., 2020, p.145). What is not known is “information available on women leaders and managers at all levels in African countries, on their experiences in leadership roles, and on the nature of challenges that female leaders encounter in developing countries” (Amayah & Haque, 2017, p.103) thus studies on female leaders in Africa, and Southern Africa, which their paper looks at, is limited.

Lewellyn and Mueller-Kahle (2020) articulated that the empowerment of women economically allows them to gain greater access to resources and opportunities, enabling them to develop their abilities through education, professional experience, and executive experience. The author’s research shows that economic empowerment affects the level of women in top management, with higher percentages of women in countries with a larger female labour participation and managerial population. However, this is not the case in South Africa. **Figure 1.4:** Top Management Distribution by Gender/Race shows that the participation level of African females has increased relative to their EAP status versus that of their Coloured counterparts at top management. Although the numbers show growth, this

is against the employment rate of 35,8 per cent in 2024, not having broached 40 per cent against their male population, thus showing lag in this regard.

Figure: 1.4: Top Management Distribution by Gender/Race



Source: QLFS Q2:2014 & 2024

Carrim and Moolman (2020) believe that women's participation (and equal membership) in the South African economy is necessary through representation in decision-making roles, power and influence. Therefore, this becomes the business need for the study and the practical implications of why it is necessary.

1.4 Research Aims and Objectives

At the other end of the glass ceiling, there seem to be limited studies on experiences beyond the ceiling, suggesting that women only get promoted to senior leadership when organisations are in crisis; this phenomenon is known as the glass cliff. (Glass & Cook, 2015). In turn, Post et al. (2021) bring to the fore how women having broken this ceiling opens the door for further investigations on the after-effects of 'passing through' and their experience. Here, we answer what is unknown and the gap that must be filled in the literature, which becomes the research aims and objectives for this body of work.

1.4.1 Research Aims

Through a qualitative process, the research aims to examine and gain insight into African and Coloured being engaged and acknowledged within their organisations as decision-makers at top management. The study will look at several factors that could be viewed as barriers and what type of support is provided in their participation and decision-making process. By the end of this study, one should answer whether African and Coloured women are regarded as valuable members within their top management teams and if or not they contribute to the strategy development for their organisation.

Further aims highlight the contribution of African and Coloured women in top management to showcase their value in their organisations despite the continued barriers they may face. Secondly, it confirms that African and Coloured women are moving away from the narrative of 'token' hires, contributing significantly to their organisational strategies and making decisions. Finally, the study seeks to contribute to the limited research on women of colour in South Africa and their experience in top management.

1.4.2 Research Objectives

The study's objective is to answer whether women of colour are involved and participate in strategic decision-making in their organisations or whether the issue of tokenism persists. The study will focus on understanding the lived experiences of women of colour as decision-makers and determining the challenges experienced when they reach these leadership echelons. By gathering qualitative data, the study will pay attention to these women who have breached the leadership ranks and are considered stakeholders in their organisations.

1.5 Significance of Research

Firstly, researchers admit to limited empirical research in the strategic decision-making in TMTs, what influences decision-making, and the processes used to get to the outcome (Shepard et al., 2020), therefore uncovering the unknown to help solve

for the problem identified. But also highlights what is known that having diversity in leadership teams brings about positive change (Shepard et al., 2020)

For the South African context, Espi et al. (2019) emphasise the necessity of research on the feminisation of the workforce, highlighting the significance of addressing gender disparities. In support of the above, Amayah and Haque (2017) identify three contributions of women to society: first, their pivotal role in economic growth, their active role in bringing together civil society, and effective good governance; secondly, their influence on sustainable socioeconomic development and leadership cultivation; and finally, their insight gained from the experiences of sub-Saharan African women, which is instrumental in enhancing their leadership capabilities across the continent.

When women of colour have ascended above the glass ceiling, what impact do they have, and does it make a significant difference, whether they are represented or not, in the contribution of organisational performance and, ultimately, success? Research on females' leadership and organisational performance has remained inconclusive, where Glass and Cook (2018) point out a tangible impact on several organisational metrics that benefit the organisation in general. Therefore, the benefits of the study will firstly add to the sparse literature on women of colour outside of a Western or European context, which has been called out in several studies (Guldiken et al., 2019). Finally, this study can be used as another clarion call for South African corporates to recognise their shortcomings and lack of diversity at senior levels and the impact it has on organisational sustainability. Furthermore, as highlighted earlier by Amayah and Haque (2017), studies in the African context can help better understand and build leadership capabilities, all while focusing on building on literature for Africa by Africans.

1.6 Study Limitations

The nature of the research required that women of colour talk about their lived experiences to better understand what they go through as minorities within their organisations and at top management. Therefore, feedback requires trust between the researcher and the participant to get the most authentic answers. Secondly,

because of the nature of the questions, some of the participants could have altered their answers to show themselves off in a good light i.e. to show their importance, had to show to the researcher that they are in the 'in-group'. Finally, researcher time and experience also were a limitation.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to provide the foundation for understanding the underrepresentation of African and Coloured women in top management within South African organisations, as the focal subject for the study. Despite the progress made in women's representation in leadership roles, significant barriers persist, for women of colour, with signs of progress not yielding positive results. The chapter has highlighted the importance of examining their lived experiences through the lenses of intersectionality and role congruency theory to gain insights into their involvement in strategic decision-making processes. The background, problem statement, and research aims and objectives have been clearly outlined, setting the stage for a comprehensive exploration of this topic. The subsequent chapters will delve into the theoretical frameworks, literature review, and empirical findings to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges and contributions of African and Coloured women in top management.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview

Despite the progress women have made in their general participation and advancement in the workplace, they still experience the glass ceiling effect, creating barriers to their entry into top management (Ng & Sears, 2017). As noted by Yoshikawa et al. (2024), who argue that appointing females in senior leadership gives way to gender diversity in top management teams (TMT), they remain underrepresented at these levels. Literature on the representation of female leaders has done a job of illuminating the challenges women face through their careers in attaining senior leadership roles and navigating the upper echelons of leadership. In contrast, studies show that women at these levels remain underrepresented, which remains a challenge. As a result, the persistence of the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership finds them with less than 30 per cent of them occupying senior leadership roles (Schultheiss, 2021). As confirmed by Round et al. (2024), the recognition of this situation on this topic remains a global problem, with the likelihood of equalising the representation of women as a distant goal.

Archer and Kam (2022) highlight that women lag in occupying prominent leadership positions across most institutional systems, including religion. In addition, Morgenroth et al. (2020) stress that despite progress, much of this movement is coupled with women taking on roles in times when the organisations are deemed to be in a state of failure, this phenomenon is known as the *glass cliff*. Interestingly, in their paper, Gartzia and Baniandrés (2019) indicate that progress has been made in women's leadership, noting that their style, linked to communal attributes, has become valuable and contributes to gender equality. In support of this, Fernando et al. (2020, p.486) brought this into perspective on women's leadership through crisis, noting that women leading in times of uncertainty may be seen as advantageous, pointing to their transformational leadership style that is the "combination of their stereotypically feminine traits, are found to be particularly relevant in crisis, conflict resolution, major change or when organizations are in turmoil". Although the authors take note of the progress made on this agenda, they argue that the barriers to senior leadership for women remain a distant goal (Fernando et al., 2020).

Despite the progress, breaking the glass ceiling, or hanging off a glass cliff, the barriers experienced by female leaders can be attributed lack of progressive policies, limited sponsorship, and organisational cultures that are not yet accustomed to and ready for change (Ng & Sears, 2017). Beyond this picture of ‘doom and gloom’, there is a positive side, that is, having women and women of colour is said to benefit organisations immensely in top management, where organisations garner better organisational reputations, innovation and performance (Ozturk & Berber, 2022). Therefore, having representation in gender diversity benefits both the agenda and organisations.

Be that as it may, the underrepresentation of women in the workplace remains a pressing issue, with entry into leadership a constant challenge. These disparities reflect overt discrimination and are deeply rooted in the complex social, cultural, and structural factors. To unpack these intricacies, it is essential to explore theoretical frameworks that can help provide a nuanced understanding of women's experiences in the professional realm. Central to this discussion is the role congruency theory, which elucidates societal gender expectations concerning women in leadership positions. Wherein the other end picks up on intersectionality, which examines the overlapping identities of race and gender and how they interact with individual experiences, it is one of the theoretical frameworks that will be discussed in the next part of the paper.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Role congruency theory

The use of Schein's (1973, 1975) *thinks manager – think male* perspective gives direction to understand why women's representation in senior leadership was not supported, suggesting that effective management was associated with stereotypical agentic male traits (Hoobler et al., 2018). Therefore, the lack of progression by females into top management, “is impressed in organisations when the symbol and ideal personas of key roles in organizations are associated with masculine traits” (Bishu & Headley, 2020, p.1065). This limitation of the progression of women can be traced to societal constructs of structural identities intertwined in social hierarchies (Seo et al., 2017). The roles of females and males have been defined by agentic and

communion. Here, by societal expectation, men are socialised to exhibit dominance, assertiveness, and control, thus displaying agentic attributes. In contrast, women are expected to be kind, nurturing and emotional, thus having communal attributes (Koch et al., 2015). Consequently, Yang et al. (in press) express that gendered role congruency favours men more than women, where women in leadership roles are viewed as incongruent with the societal norms and communal traits they are expected to possess and, therefore, do not fit leadership type roles.

Introduced by Eagly and Karau in 2002, (gender) role congruency theory (RCT) identified several factors contributing to discrimination, specifically against female leaders. To this end, Zheng et al. (2018) provide insights into discrimination against female leaders, highlighting society associate's leadership with agentic characteristics whereby aggression, confidence, and dominance (amongst others) are associated with men, whereas women are "expected" to maintain communal characteristics, which then cause incongruencies when they assume leadership roles. Wang et al. (2019, p.747) speak to RCT as being "rooted in social role theory that focuses on the congruency between gender and leadership roles".

The theory establishes a critical assessment of the expectation for two social roles as being incongruent, based on social expectations defined by social categorisation (Biddle, 1979; Eagly, 1987), where a person holds conflicting roles – women and leadership (Triana et al., 2024) then are said to be incongruent. Therefore, by these standards and stereotypes, women are expected to hold subordinate roles (Yang et al., in press), 'balancing' the gender stereotype. Beyond the conflicting roles and trying to balance stereotypes, the barriers that women face due to outdated societal standards, is another reason why women remain underrepresented in organisational leadership. Samuelson et al. (2019, p.1), highlight that women face "two noteworthy barriers", that being leadership development and organisational entry into leadership roles.

2.2.2 RCT and Female Leadership

Although there are "many forms of gender inequality in the workplace, few are as visible as the underrepresentation of women" (Georgeac & Rattan, 2019, p.2) top management. The belief that leaders are to have specific traits that favour men, and

that women who have agentic leadership behaviours (drivers, dominant, decisive, etc.), perpetuates the barriers women experience in ascending into leadership. (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Therefore, women are expected to be leaders, and in leadership roles, but rather to conform to communal behaviours (nurturing, relational, soft etc.), which do not align to leadership standards either, creating an incongruent situation (Schock et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly, women face a great dilemma as leaders wherein, management studies point to the importance of demonstrating both agentic and communal – androgyny, characteristics in leadership, which, “pose a major challenge because agency and communion can be seen as opposites, [...] and such an opposition is more prominent for women than men” (Zheng, 2018, p.584). This challenge is further accentuated by social categorisation, which stems from the social role theory (SRT), that speaks to the foundation of social groupings and how over time, form specific identities, such as that of an overrepresentation of a specific group member in certain roles, i.e. think nurse – think female.

Considering this, RCT, as an extension of SRT, is an evaluation mechanism in an organisational context that uses stereotypical traits as a barrier for women’s leadership. (Paluch & Shum, 2023). For this study, gender RCT (GRCT) is a key theory to build on, as it outlines why there is an apparent mismatch when it comes to females and leadership and their role in the organisation. Yang et al. (2020) explain that gender is constructed by society based on social and cultural norms, and less to do with ‘biology’, which dictate how men and women are expected to behave. Therefore (G)RCT holistically views individuals’ behaviour according to their gender as preferred by societal norms, and where there is deviation, one can become stigmatised (Butticè et al., 2023). Research on this suggests that gender roles and stereotypes are so ingrained in our way of being, that men and women “endorse these gender stereotypes” (Yang et al., 2020, p.7), creating the initial barrier of why it may be so difficult for women to ascend into leadership roles. In addition to these contextual environments and cultural expectations can also shape how leadership is perceived for either gender, influencing who gets leadership roles (Jiang et al., 2024). As a result, these stereotypes have caused women to navigate their careers in ways that they need to mitigate stereotypes throughout their careers and created further barriers. Samuelson et al. (2019) highlight that men and women have an equal desire for high status opportunities, however, receive less of these opportunities. This is again based on stereotypes that they need to be protected and belief that they are

less competent at agentic tasks (Samuelson et al., 2019) such as leadership. Even with the right opportunities presented to women, research confirms that stereotypically that leadership roles are “decidedly masculine” (Wang et al., 2019, p.747). What is apparent is that RCT prejudices the female leader, as the role of leader is incongruent with the expected communal behaviours and characteristics required by them leading, “to a variety of gender inequality phenomenon in leadership roles, including [their] underrepresentation” (Jiang et al., 2024, p.4). When females get leadership roles, they are usually scrutinised and judged inaccurately, making their leadership journey a minefield of barriers to be overcome (Rocha & van Praag, 2020).

Although recent studies suggest that female leadership traits fit the needs of current organisations (Jiang et al. 2024), this has still left an indelible mark on the representation of females in leadership roles in the 21st century. Dwivedi et al. (2021), point out that entry into these roles face significant barriers due to the stereotypical assumptions held about women and leadership and women in leadership. The tensions that exist and experienced by female leaders are held in the contextual setting, from the level of representation of women in the organisation. Therefore, need to navigate and balance expectations of being a strong leader, and being expected to conform to traditional female traits (Zheng et al., 2018), creating conflict for female leaders. However, what remains unclear, is the experiences of women of colour in their experiences of being leaders in contextual settings that have not historically regarded them?

What is clear, is the experiences of female leaders in senior management has made been study extensively in relation to RCT. However, there are limited studies on women of colour who have reached these roles and spoken about their experiences. The next part of the paper will bring in a view of this experience related to women of colour, by extension, the South African Black and Coloured women and their experiences in corporate, through the lens of intersectionality.

2.2.3 Intersectionality

The premise of this study will focus on the lived experiences of women of colour in South African organisations, examining role incongruity and intersectionality,

particularly among senior leaders who participate in decision-making within their organisations. The study of gender and race in the workplace, specifically related to women of colour, aligns with Crenshaw's (1989) seminal work, wherein the introduction of intersectionality as a theoretical framework was first coined. This theory posits that individuals' lived experiences are not one-dimensional but rather intersect with other identities, i.e., female lesbians of colour; those intersections are the variety that influence both life (and lived) experiences and societal interactions (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019). Consequently, this theoretical framework is apt for examining the lived experiences of women of colour in South African organisations.

At the core of intersectionality, Crenshaw emphasised that the identities of black women, that is, are identities that are interwoven in institutional systems that is historically oppressive, "given their continued exposure to discrimination and underrepresentation" (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019, p.144). Furthermore, Thatcher et al. (2023) expanded on this, highlighting that Black women are unique in that they experience life differently from race, gender, or a mix of the two. Comparisons to other women with combinations is incomparable, as Black women's identities reveal other power structure dynamics that they need to contend with society unique only them and their experiences (Thatcher et al., 2023). However, through organisational shifts in the diversity of people moving in and out of the workplace, Wilkins-Yel et al. (2019, p.52), posit that individuals' lived experiences are not exclusive to identity but are multidimensional, where other identities associated with social categorisation, such as religion, class, and various categories, shape people's perspective, and how "they navigate multiple shifting categories of identity" in a matrix of oppression. Even with this view, Wilkins-Yel and authors (2019) emphasise that the structural system (of race, gender, and class) marginalises women of colour whilst, on the other end, benefiting those at the top of the hierarchical systems, that created them.

In line with the study of women of colour in an organisational setting, the institutional theory offers a framework for analysing intersectionality (Thatcher et al., 2023). This framework outlines the undeniable: institutions and organisations perpetuate systematic inequalities. These institutions are set up to 'cater' for the white male, in which the system that makes up the institutional processes is designed around 'him', and overtime iterated to fit 'his' narrative (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). Here is where intersectionality, RCT and institutional theory converge to create misalignment roles

such as those of leaders against a prototype, resulting mostly what you see in society and organisations, the underrepresentation of minority groups.

Additionally, scholars have identified that organisations and their diversity management practices have not evolved with their organisations but have cherished dated practices (and maybe policies), because “diversity management practices remain[ed] firmly entrenched in identity-based initiatives aimed at increasing the number of [...] marginalised social groups in organisations” (Dennissen et al., 2020, p.220). The marginalised social group is Black women, where Smith et al. (2019, p.1706), point to the scarcity of literature on Black women’s experience in organisations, but instead drawing on work done on white women, “with conclusions drawn for all”. The organisational context, the lack of evolving practices, and little known about the Black professional female, it what is unknown in the management studies. And what is more concerning, is that generalisation of Black women’s experiences against other groups, confuses “what we do not know” further, therefore it is important to understand what interventions can begin to assist with unravelling the unknown.

Küskü et al. (2021) put forward diversity management is as a result and reaction to changes within the workplace, therefore will not undo systematic inequalities to the extent required. Köllen (2021) however argues that diversity management is enacted differently in different national contexts, wherein some countries, like that of South Africa, legislate it through legal frameworks, that aid in the acceleration of organisational diversity management practices. What remains true, is that there is limited data on the research, particularly on the plight of women of colour from management studies

The next part of the paper will focus on organisational constructs pertinent to this study, that being strategic decision-making, gendered leadership, and the context setting of the study, on South Africa, and leadership from a woman of colour in that setting.

2.3 Strategic Decision-making and Top Management

Strategy is critical in shaping organisations' short- and long-term strategic initiatives to achieve company objectives, ultimately contributing to the organisational bottom line and its sustainability. Although the literature has failed to emphasise the role of leaders in “shaping organisations’ strategy, corporate practices and performance”, there are critical attributes and activities through strategy formulation tied to top management and organisational performance (Tsolmon, 2022, p.684). Furthermore, Tsolmon (2022) reveals the variability of business practices among managers has substantial managerial impacts on productivity and company success. In their study, *Beyond Tokenism*, Guldiken et al. (2019), confirm that future studies need to focus on the implications of female leaders in strategic roles in organisations outside of the United States. This will be the focus for the study below, providing initial background of strategic decision-making and creating a contextual link from the study to be discussed later in the paper.

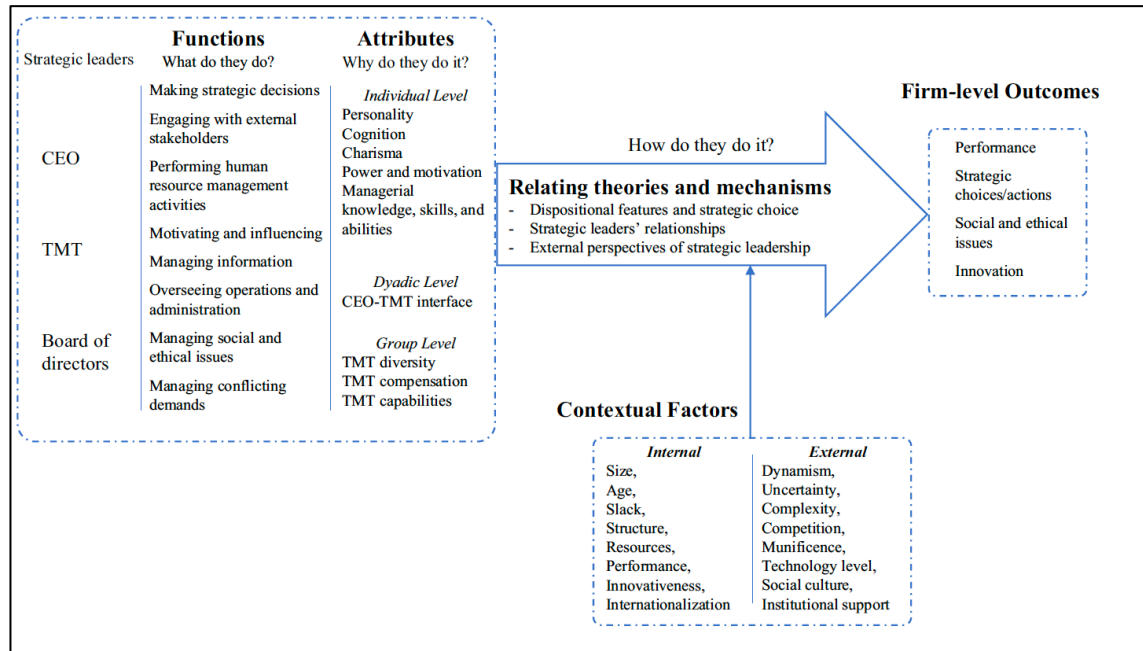
2.3.1 Strategic Decision-Making

Drawing on Song and authors (2024) work, it is said that senior management is responsible for decision-making, ensuring that execution related to the direction and planning of implementation aligns with the organisation’s vision and mission. Empirical studies indicate that participation in strategic decision-making positively impacts the organisation. This suggests that those involved are crucial in the decision-making process (Al-Hashimi & Weerakkdoy, 2021). Therefore, senior leaders are significantly influential in the strategic decisions made, as they set out the organisation's direction due to their role – by hierarchy, through allocating resources under their control. (Hodgkinson et al., 2023). The role that top managers play as strategic leaders – see **Figure 2.1: Strategic Leadership Flow Chart**, shows the critical process flows decided at the TMT level and filters through each strategic activity, mechanism and context that result in what would be seen in the organisation’s performance.

This suggests that the TMT have a direct influence (and hand) in shaping internal and external factors, which denotes that being in a TMT is a source of power and influence. As such, this requires that there is diversity in spaces such as boards and

TMTs, one view of strategic leadership, can create the skewed effects that we see in organisations today. Therefore, as a critical success factor, Xu et al. (2024) highlight that having diversity within the team makes for good decision-making and benefits performance. What is not known is the process engaged in the strategic decision-making in TMTs as highlighted by (Shepard et al., 2020).

Figure: 2.1: Strategic Leadership Flow Chart



Source: Samimi et al., (2022)

2.3.3 Strategic Decision-Making and Top Management

The role of leaders at top management is crucial in strategic decision-making (Song et al., 2024). The processes deployed in TMT are essential for effective leadership, as their ability to navigate and direct these processes is integral to organisational success (Yi et al., 2022). The decision-making process, as described by Song et al. (2024), requires collaboration between all members of the TMT, where empowerment from the top manager sets the tone for behaviour and approach to the process. As strategic decision-making comes with complex power dynamics, which have far-reaching consequences (Shepard et al., 2020) on the organisation, decision-making at that level is said to be risky in nature, as the level of responsibility and accountability one has to others is significant. (Shepard et al., 2020). What remains clear about leaders at this level is that leaders “have the power to shape

their firms' strategic direction and influence the lives of people both inside and outside their organisations" (Solarino & Aguinis, 2021, p.650). For this reason, fostering and advancing gender diversity and minority representation in top management becomes crucial, as these leadership roles have a greater impact on society at large, and no one group should have total power to control that narrative.

The nuance of leadership and gender comes into how decision is made. Alan et al. (2019) notes gender differences in decision-making, where women are less likely to avoid causing harm based on decisions made under their leadership. Explained by Villanueva-Moya and Expósito (2021, p.709), factors linked to decision-making are also linked to gender stereotypes, in which we see the differences in decision-making, where "women have higher context-sensitivity than men that is, they seem to be more sensitive to signals (e.g., threats, punishments, and negative social evaluations) and consequently could modify their behaviour in accordance to what is expected of them". Resultantly, women withdraw from masculine domains – leadership positions, to decrease their risk aversion behaviour, legitimising the lack of participation in leader type positions (Villanueva-Moya & Expósito, 2021).

Although Yang et al. (in press) found similar patterns of females' uptake of risk aversion in their entrepreneurial prospects, noting their low self-efficacy, were less likely to produce self-employed women, Fernando and authors (2020) came to a different conclusion, noting that having women as leaders is necessary, as they have superior capability of skills, and their ability to meet the double standards of competence, makes them highly valuable leadership team members.

While this may be the case, women still need to be represented, which reflects all types of leadership styles and attributes. Theories like the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and upper echelons theory posit that having women in leadership can affect organisational performance, where the culture is conducive for women to occupy leadership roles (Hobler et al., 2018). Kalodimos and Leavitt (2020) emphasise that decision-making goes beyond driving strategy; it shapes policies within organisations that have a far-reaching impact outside of the organisation that decision-makers are responsible for, a view that fits the foundation of this study; what role do women have in decision-making and they valued participants in strategic decision making?

The caveat of this study is the focus on women of colour in top management positions and their role in decision-making in South African organisations.

What is not known, according to Samimi et al. (2020, p.4);

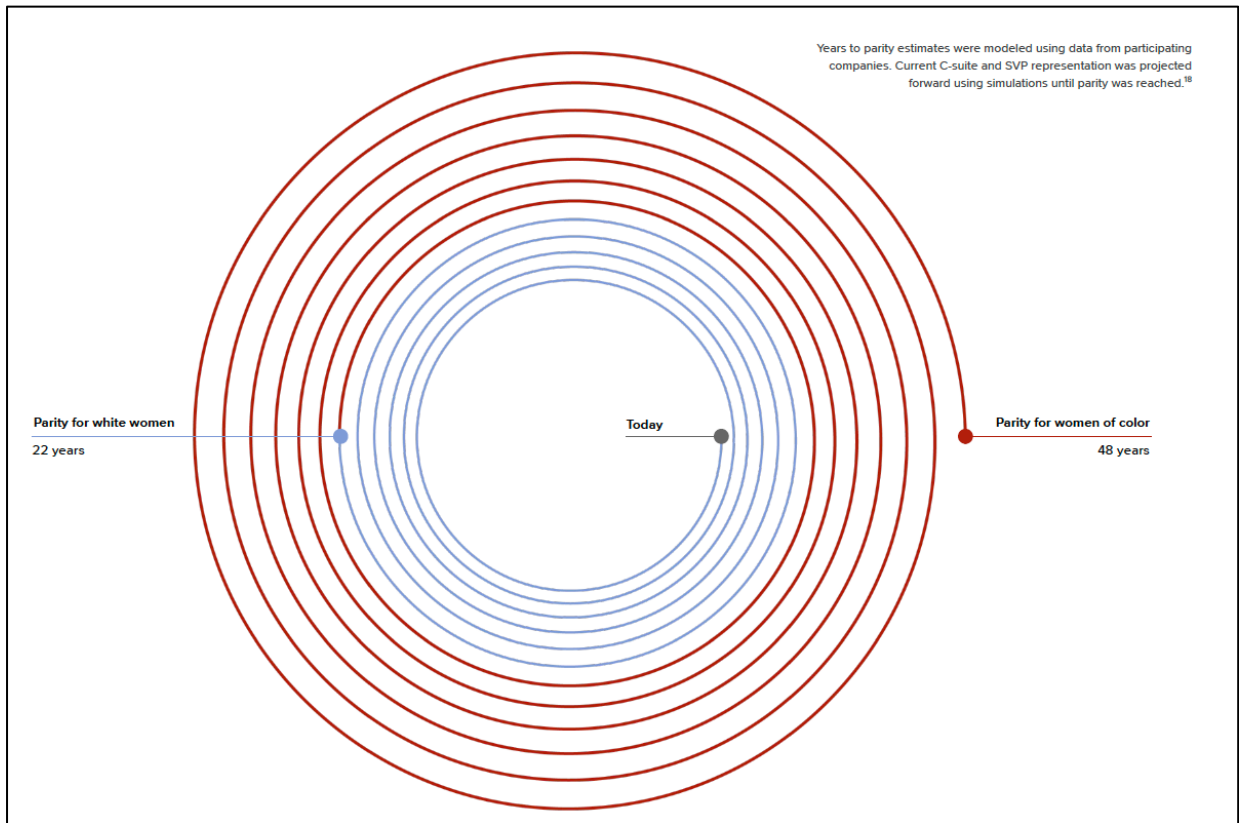
“Despite the large body of research on the strategic decision function, several important aspects of the function are understudied. Strategic leaders sometimes delay or delegate certain strategic decisions because of potential difficulties or possible negative outcomes. The drivers behind such behaviors and their influence on the firm remain unexplored”.

For this reason, a study such as this will add to the limited literature that is specific to a South African context to uncover the ‘*unexplored, the behaviours*’ experienced by women of colour in their organisations.

2.4 Female leadership and women of colour

As an ‘arm’ of leadership, gender and leadership studies have mostly been linked to the ideals of white individuals’ characteristics and behaviour, which can be seen through time, into the current days (Paluch & Shum, 2023). As a result, the study of leadership has focussed extensively on male leadership, with studies being expanded to women and women of colour in the late 1990s (Schultheiss, 2021). Research shows that “we know very little about how successful Black women contend with the benefits and the costs of being Black and a woman, as they navigate their careers at upper echelons” (Smith et al. 2019, p.1705). Interestingly, from interviews in their study on elite leadership, Glass and Cook (2020) established that white women and people of colour are disadvantaged when it comes to achieving leadership positions. Although this may be the case, it is evident that parity for Black women – see **Figure 2.1: White Women vs Black Women year to parity** shows 48 years in difference – almost half a decade before Black women reach parity. Although this comparison by Glass and Cook has some truths, it cannot be used as a legitimate comparison considering the group we speak of in this study.

Figure 2.2: White Women vs. Black Women years to parity



Source: Women in the Workplace, McKinsey 2024 report

Glass and Cook (2020) group women as collective, whereas this study focuses on women of colour only because the representation of Black women in senior leadership is sparse in comparison to their white peers, who, even though are underrepresented, Black women are worse off in their representation in professional arenas (Smith et al., 2019). In their paper, Bishu and Headley (2020, p.1064) criticised this, noting that white women were beneficiaries of affirmative action concerning employment and education, which can act as a “blind spot for legislation”, therefore, it would be pointless on focusing on gender alone in this regard.

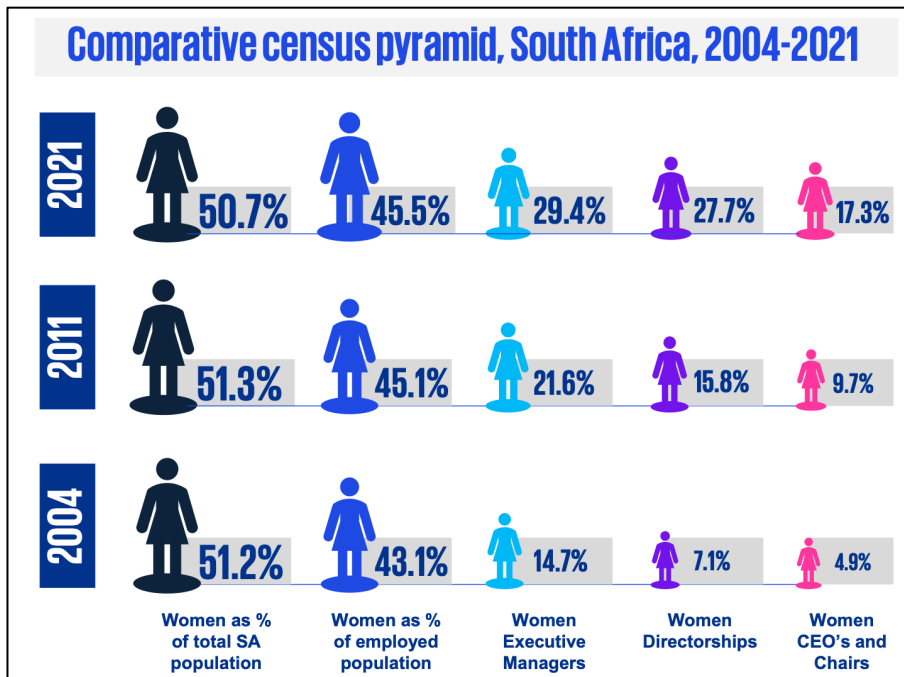
It is for this reason that we bring it what is not known, and that is the extent to which Black women are marginalised even in spaces where they have been given opportunities. Furthermore, there is limited research on women of colour in leadership that has focused on Black American, Latina, and Asian women, with minimal studies focusing on an African context. Lewis (2023, p.77) argues that “literature adopts approaches that present women and people of colour as somehow deficient, further reinforcing and perpetuating marginalisation”.

Bring in a line to connect the sentence. “For many people, national identities still shape how people make sense of themselves and others. As these sense-making processes can establish nationalist mechanisms of hierarchisation within workplaces, it is important to address the dimension of nationality in diversity research and practices more explicitly” (Köllen, 2021, p. 264).

Post et al. (2021) also consider that national context matters, as it is implicit in implementing regulations such as employment equity, which influence diversity on race and ethnicity. A case of this national context through regulations enforced representation at the board level was in Norway in 2003. The Norwegian government made it mandatory to have the representation of 40 per cent of women in publicly listed organisations regarding board composition (Bertrands, 2019). The authors point out that though quotas by the government may be an effective tool to ensure gender equality, they should not solely rely on these policies alone, as organisations do find ways to “play the system” by not adhering to guidelines (Bertrands, 2019). With that in mind, for the South African context, legislation for these matters, due to the context of the previous regime was exclusionary of people of colour (Lewis, 2021).

Although the study, through literature, continues to show the improvement of women in senior leadership, Detjen and Webber (2017, p.366) acknowledge that the situation has become more complex, knowing there is an “impetus to increase the number of women in senior leadership roles” across organisations. The authors point to these women being stuck in the middle management talent pipeline. (Detjen & Webber, 2017). From an African lens on female leadership, women on the continent struggle to get into leadership roles (Amina & Ibrahim, 2019); similarly, in South Africa, authors Vyas-Doorgapersad and Shava (2022) viewed gender equality as a challenge due to the patriarchal system that discouraged women and their participation in activities such as economic affairs. As such, Jansen van Rensburg (2021) alludes to the negative perception toward women in leadership, saying that feminine leadership does not fit what leaders are known to be in organisations.

Figure 2.3: Comparative census pyramid, South Africa 2004 – 2021,



Source: KMPG

Although this is an overarching narrative for women, in South Africa, the picture has shown positive gains in the senior and top management representation – see **Figure 2.3:** Representation of women in leadership; many have managed to find representation in South African organisations. Gradin (2021) brings to the fore that, through education, women of colour have been recognised in professional jobs due to their education.

The lack of representation of a woman of women in the global economy is still prevalent and is no different (if not worse) in Africa. It is obvious that “most African women endure chronic economic disadvantages compared to men in that “[t]hey suffer various forms of gender-based discrimination and remain marginalised in many sectors” (Techane, 2017, p.334). As such, it is imperative that literature on this remains current, as there is an admission that little is known about women's leadership in Africa, the role that they play in their economies and the challenges they face as leaders (Amayah & Haque 2017). To bring this into context, women in South Africa, as in most developing countries, are said to continually experience these challenges despite multitudes of interventions, and to further expand on this, we can infer that woman. In addition, Amayah and Haque (2017, p.103) assert that

“more research is needed on leadership in Africa to help African managers, organisations and societies understand and improve leadership practice”.

2.5 The South African Context

South African history plays a centralised role in the shaping of its constitution and government policies seen today. As a system, Apartheid institutionalised the racial segregation and discrimination of South Africans, in which those that were disadvantaged were Africans, Coloured and Indians (Warnich et al., 2018). Under apartheid, the workplace was heavily segregated, where White South Africans occupied most of the senior management positions (Gardín, 2021), which is still evident 30 years after its democracy. Black South Africans were excluded from professional roles, creating a defiance gap in skills, experience, opportunity, and pay (Epsi et al., 2019). The workplace, especially senior leadership roles, has been deeply affected by apartheid, South Africa's system of institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination (Epsi et al., 2019). With the end of Apartheid in 1994, its legacy still affects leadership and employment equity in South African organisations.

Women's participation in South Africa's economy is significant in its shape and size. With that logic, their system should surely be designed for women to succeed. Nearly half of South Africa's Economically Active Population (EAP) is women, who only occupy 24,9 per cent of senior leadership positions compared to the White population, who occupy 64,7 per cent in the private sector (Lewis, 2023). Although the transition to a democratic South Africa realised the revision of legislation addressing previous injustices, such as the Employment Equity Act (EEA) and Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), White men and people still maintain elevated status by social status and workplace opportunity (Van de Rheede, 2022). Whereas Black South Africans and Coloured women remain severely marginalised, which is seen in the number of professional jobs that they occupy, and more so, in reaching management, inversely in the low-paying jobs they mostly occupy. (Gradín, 2021). With this backdrop, the study will focus on the experiences of Black and Coloured women, who have since managed to '*break the glass ceiling*' and made it to the upper echelons, and their contribution to decision-making in their organisations.

2.6 African and Coloured Women and Leadership in South Africa

In 1956, the largest mass protest by women against the oppression of black South African women took place (Orton, 2018); this was the first mass-scale demonstration of women's power and leadership. This struggle has since continued taking on various forms in societies across the globe, where marches about gender equality are seen as a societal push (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023) to address marginalisation of all forms. In South Africa, women remain at the tail end of societal dysfunction and bear the brunt of marginalisation. Before 1994, the apartheid regime limited the participation of all women in the economy (Gradín, 2021). African women were especially excluded and remained in low-paying jobs (Mathur-Helm 2016), which is still the case today. In the late 1990s, there saw an increase in women entering the labour market, all be it informal, where they began to show their economic participation in the South African market, soon entering entrepreneurship and management (Mathur-Helm, 2016). Although there has been progress in the participation and representation of females in the economy, women more than men remain disadvantaged (CGE, 2024).

In South Africa, women of colour, in terms of the classification act (to review), are classified as Black, Coloured, Indian, and Asian (who are naturalised). The ambient of this study will focus on African and Coloured women, as they are the most marginalised and grossly underrepresented in the organisational top management. (Wärnich et al., 2018). Although we consider all gender issues in South Africa as critical, the decision to focus only on these two groups is not to imply that the issues faced by Indian and Asian women are not important; however, in the South African context, African and Coloured women remain the most marginalised and underrepresented across, and therefore fitting that studies such as this continue to highlight the socio-economic ills, still found 30 years into the South African democracy.

The ascension of women into leadership positions is distinct from that of men. In South Africa, this can be attributed to challenges that were seen under the apartheid regime, which restricted women's activity in the economy (Lewis, 2023). This legacy can be seen in today's organisations. In their work – Managing Diversity in the South

African Workplace, Carrim and Moolman's' (2020) assessment of the literature showcases a conceded effort through legislative policies for the advancement and development of women. However, organisational leaders find themselves challenged in removing barriers for women, which is reflective of where organisations find themselves.

2.7 Why is representation so important in this context?

Although the literature has shown that there have been strides made across industries in '*breaking the glass ceiling*', seemingly there is still a real barrier that exists when it comes to women leaders, and more so for those of colour, where it seems that the advancement of female leaders remains a conundrum. The role that women play in the promotion of economic development is one of prominence as it has been noted that "across countries and overtime there is a strong positive correlation between the relative position of women in society and the level of economic development." (Doepke & Terilt, 2019, p.310). Therefore, the aim of this study is to ensure that women of colour are fully represented as members are included in the decision-making process.

2.8 Conclusion

The reviewed literature underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of Black and Coloured women's experiences within South African organizations. Despite legislative progress and increased awareness of gender and racial equity, these women continue to navigate significant barriers rooted in historical and structural inequalities. Their participation in strategic decision-making processes remains constrained by persistent stereotypes, lack of support, and discriminatory practices.

However, the literature also highlights resilience and adaptability among these women, showcasing their capacity to influence organisational strategies positively when given the opportunity. This review underscores the need for continued research and practical interventions to dismantle these barriers, promote inclusive policies, and foster environments where Black and Coloured women can thrive as decision-makers.

By synthesizing these findings, this review paves the way for future studies to explore more deeply the intersections of race, gender, and leadership and to develop actionable strategies for enhancing the representation and effectiveness of Black and Coloured women in strategic roles within South African organisations.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research in leadership remains a multifaceted topic that can provide deep insights, with varying approaches researchers can delve into, considering the environment in which business organisations operate. One such topic remains the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, their plight in breaking the glass ceiling, and their experiences once they have reached the top. Forty years on, the progress of culling the underrepresentation of women in coveted leadership roles has yet to show progress globally. The Grant Thornton (2024) report acknowledges that there has been improvement; however, 1,1 per cent is not nearly sufficient for gender parity to be achieved. To underscore this further, where women have ascended to these echelons of leadership, studies have remained critical on the role they play in their impact on the bottom line, with some suggesting that their promotions into such type roles occur mostly in times of crisis, a phenomenon known as the glass cliff (Glass & Cook, 2015), that is, captaining a 'sinking ship' as it were.

3.1 Introduction

The literature review has illuminated the limited research in management studies on the representation of females of colour in top management. Additionally, the literature on leadership from an African and Southern African context is limited (Amayah & Haque, 2017). This chapter will provide the precise purpose of the research, as defined for this study by research questions. The study will be conducted using three research questions that focus on the participation of women of colour and barriers faced in their organisations as women in top management. It will also acknowledge by questioning what support their organisations provide considering the transformation agenda.

3.2 Purpose of research

Through a qualitative process, this research will examine and gain insight to ascertain if Black and Coloured women are engaged and acknowledged within their organisations as decision-makers in their roles as senior leaders in top management.

Lewis (2023) notes that there has been substantial research indicating that women navigate distinct career journeys to leadership in comparison to their male counterparts and considering the implementation of the EEA to address the historical marginalisation of those previously disadvantaged, there is still much to be done in the advancing of women of colour into top management. Therefore, the primary research question is: Are women of colour involved in their organisational decision-making processes as leaders? The next part of the paper will cover the research questions in detail, which will be what the study is based on

3.3 Research Question 1

Strategy (and the decision-making process) is the architecture of an organisation's strategic vision and results, crafted by top management teams (Liu et al., 2022). However, when assessing who makes these decisions, a clear, distinct group of individuals is given 'privilege' and status in organisations to make decisions on the direction of their organisations. Long-term survival is measured by decisions to ensure the execution of investment, financing, and resource deployment activities, a critical attribute that is a consequence of performance in an organisation (Alan et al., 2019). For this reason, the study will focus on this element to assess whether women of colour are entrusted with decisions related to the long-term survival of the organisations in which they are employed.

The study will examine several factors that could be viewed as barriers and the type of support provided in their participation and decision-making process. By the end of this study, one should be able to answer whether Black and Coloured women are regarded as valuable members within their top management teams, where they are members, and whether they contribute to the strategy development for their organisation, here with the question posed that will be the foundation of the study:

Are Black and Coloured women involved in strategic decision-making in their organisations at top management?

3.3. Research Question 2

Women in leadership roles are still marginalised and face various barriers even when they have broken the glass ceiling. As confirmed by Bishu and Headley (2020), even

after attaining leadership roles, women are still subjected to exclusionary practices that create barriers even after attaining leadership roles. In Africa and South Africa, the barriers that are experienced are related to education, cultural nuances, discrimination and other gender-related stereotypes (Xiang et al., 2017)

RQ three will seek to understand what barriers women of colour face when reaching the upper echelons. Beyond this, this question will attempt to uncover the barriers experienced at the pre-leadership attainment level, as that will give a steer to the next research question.

What are barriers do African and Coloured women face in their roles in top management and their participation in strategic decision-making?

3.4 Research Question 3

The nature of the study involves women of colour who were previously marginalised. the study needs to help answer how organisations have been able to mitigate this for women of colour and what it looks like for them when they have reached top management levels. The advent of the new regime required the redressing of the system that required various reforms that would help address workplace inequalities (CGE, 2023). Such reforms Affirmative action initiatives such as the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA), Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) and Employment Equity Act (EEA) were ways that the government legislated for the acceleration and participation of those that were previously disadvantaged in participating in the economy.

The next research question is because of organisations' progress (and lack thereof). Wörnich et al. (2018) point out that many organisations are ignorant of the commitments to gender equality. While organisations may develop plans to that promote gender equality, they most often fail to put these structures into practice. However, what remains clear is the promotion of equality in organisations, which the South African government legislates. Therefore, the final research question looks to assess this by asking the following:

How do organisations support the participation of African and Coloured women in strategic decision-making?

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of the research methodology used to answer the research questions. The purpose of this chapter is to provide details of the research methodology, that is, the research design, purpose, philosophy, approach, timeframe of the research conducted, sampling and data collection methods, and instrument, measurement, and analysis process for the study. The final part of the methodology will look at various limitations related to the research methodology, followed by the conclusion.

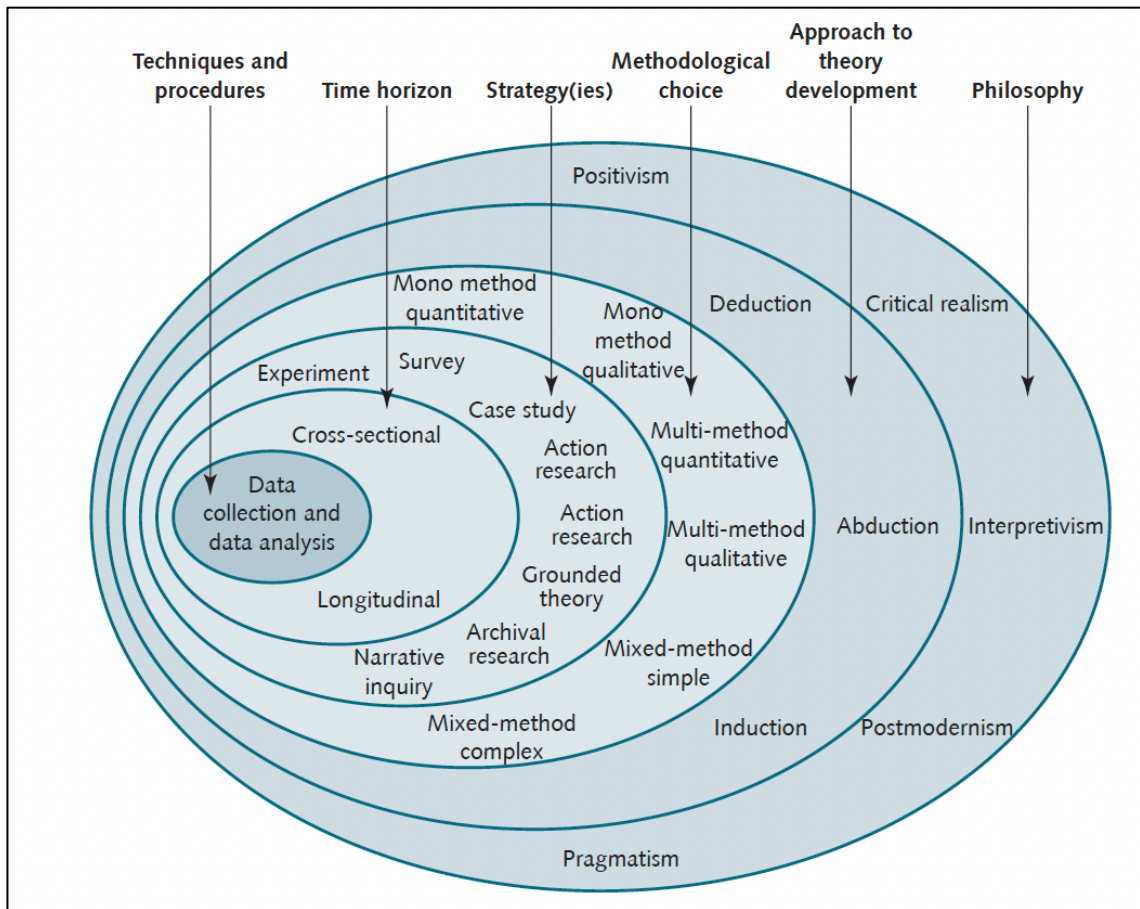
4.2 Research Aims

As noted in Chapter 1, 1.4, the study aimed to explore whether women of colour—African and Coloured women—engaged in and were considered decision-makers concerning strategy in their roles in top management in South African organisations. The research further examined the barriers they faced and the support they received in the decision-making process. Therefore, the primary aim of the research was to determine if African and Coloured women are seen as valuable members of their top management teams, with the extended aim of contributing to limited research of this nature in the South African literary context.

4.3 Research Design

The research design is the blueprint for fulfilling objectives and answering research questions. It is a detailed plan that assists with providing guidance on how research goals will be met and helps answer the research questions (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). **Figure 4.1.:** Research Onion provides an overview of how the research design should pan out and acts as a guiding tool through the research process.

Figure 4.1: Research onion



Source: Saunders & Lewis (2018)

4.3.1 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy is the ideas and beliefs about how knowledge is developed and understood about the world (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Paradigm is the “preferred ways of understanding reality, building knowledge and gathering data about the world” (Tracy, 2020, p.50). For research purposes, the philosophy aided the approach used in conducting the said research, as it defined the methodology used, and how data was collected and analysed. (Rahi, 2017). There are three types of paradigm assumptions – see **Table 4.1:** Paradigm Assumptions, are assumptions that were applied to conduct the research, taking note that ontological assumptions spoke directly to the what the study wanted to get as an outcome “experiences from the person who lives through it” (Sanchez et al., 2023).

Table 4.1 Paradigm Assumptions

Paradigm Assumptions			
Type	Definition	Relevance	Use in current research
Ontology	Assumptions about the nature of reality	In business/management studies this includes individuals working in organisations, and experiencing organisational events	Yes. Assumption is used as the study is on experiences of certain type of people
Epistemology	Assumptions about knowledge	In business/management looks at a wide range of knowledge sources that may be relevant i.e. visual, written text	No
Axiology	Assumptions emphasise importance of values and ethics	Reference to researchers and participants ethics and values and choice of data collection	Yes. Interviews were conducted for the study, preferences to personal interactions - researcher strength

Source: Saunders & Lewis (2018)

Due to the nature of the study, the research philosophy best suited for the study conducted was phenomenological-interpretivism, as the study focussed on gaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences of African and Coloured women on their lived experiences in their organisations and their perspective on how they believed they were engaged as leaders in top management. The phenomenological-interpretivism approach “aims to understand how individuals “live” a given experience” (Sanchez et al., 2023, p.2). Additionally, Sanchez and the authors (2023) point to this approach as intentionally focusing on the participants' lived experiences under study.

4.3.2 Research Approach

The research study's approach needed to ensure that the research aims and questions were answered. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of African and Coloured women within their organisations around their involvement in decision-making as senior leaders. Taherdoost (2022, p.54) refers to the type of approach to this research as qualitative, which speaks to the “interpretive approaches to different subject matters.” The qualitative approach is suitable as this approach seeks to describe, decode, and understand a phenomenon.

4.3.3 Methodological Choices

The desired outcome of the study was to gain in-depth understanding of the participants lived experiences on specific events in their organisations. The

information/data gathered had to be intimate to reach the crux of the research's aim. The analysed data was collected through a single technique: interviewing – a single approach was used to collect the data. The selection of this method aligned with the philosophy and approach that required the interpretation of the participants' experiences. Why this choice fitting described by Tracy (2020, p.156) explained that the process of interviewing allows for the participants to “provide opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection and explanation, [where], subjectively lived experiences and viewpoints from the respondents' perspectives”, and these viewpoints analysed for the purpose of the study.

4.3.4 Research Strategy

This research design aims to profile Black and Coloured women and their lived experiences in a particular context. Therefore, the study utilised a phenomenological (descriptive) inquiry. Connected to the philosophical approach of interpretivism, the use of this strategy was appropriate, as it is premised on getting to the crux of a phenomenon (Frechette et al., 2020), which is how the participant's intersectionality at their level plays a role in their participation in decision-making. Frechette and authors described this strategy fittingly, pointing to the *dasien*, lived experiences and *existential*, authenticity – authenticity on one's lived experiences in 'everydayness' that may go unnoticed. As such, this study focussed on how, after Black and Coloured women have reached top management, their contributions get 'noticed' in the form of participation and input; therefore, phenomenology aided with unpacking these events in their varying organisations.

4.3.4 Timeframe of research

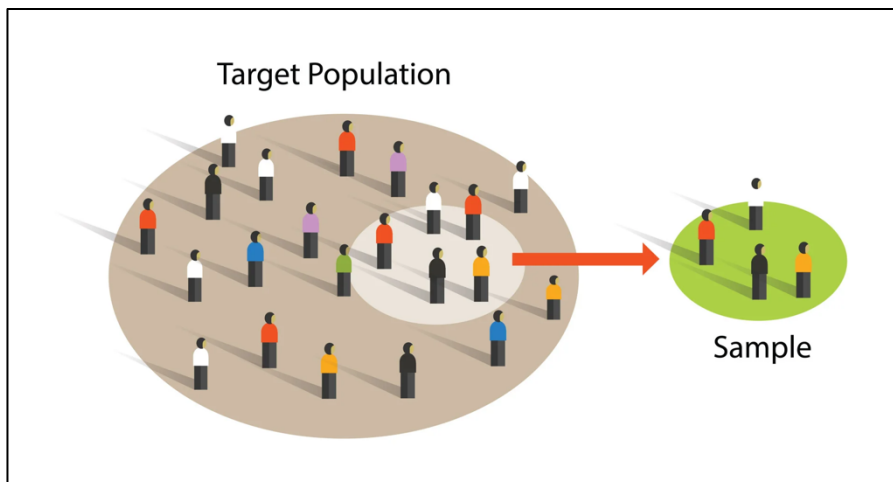
The time at which the data is collected needs to be considered, as this affects the outcome of the study, which leads to the benefits and limitations of the study. For this study, a cross-sectional design was used, where the data was collected at one point in time due to the limited time required to complete the study. Because the participants were interviewed at one point in time, the study is categorised as a cross-sectional study (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). For organisational research, this is the most utilised design and is said to be the most efficient for researchers with limited resources (Spencer, 2019), which was one of the limitations of the study.

4.4. Research Methodology

4.4.1 The Population

The population for this study was a sample (a subgroup of the population) of African and Coloured women in South Africa who occupy top management positions across various organisations.

Figure: 4.1: Target vs. Populations



Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/nsUaETsGmVct22nD7>

4.4.2 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is said to be the story the data will tell from the data analysed (Zilber & Meyer 2022). The primary data that was subject to examination was the participation of the sample group—Black and Coloured women selected—and their lived experience and participation in strategic decision-making. As explained by Ospina et al. (2017), being able to identify a proper unit of analysis, get the researcher to draw the relevant conclusions from their research, and establish inferences.

4.4.3 Sampling Strategy

The Sampling method deployed for this study was non-probability, as the researcher had no access to the full population of the target group (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Non-probability has four techniques, of which purposive sampling was the selected

technique for the study. This technique is used when there is a need for specific subjects; thus, picking subjects that qualify to participate (Saunders & Lewis, 2018), would require a participation criterion to be met. In this case the criteria was the following

- Black and Coloured women
- Participant in top management (senior – top management by DOL standards)
- Working in a medium – to – large firm
- Based in South Africa (province was not considered)

Through research, it was established that the above sampling technique better suits the outcomes desired from the study, which guided the researcher to “select participants that have rich knowledge of the phenomenon” (Frechette et al., 2020, p.6) of their lived experiences. However, one limitation that was identified before the commencement of the research was that due to the seniority of the sample required, accessing the participants would be challenging. To mitigate this, another technique deployed was snowball sampling, which helped access ‘hard to reach’ participants. This technique uses the referral, in which initial participants refer participants within their network (Saunders & Lewis, 2018)

This sampling strategy proved to be valuable during the initial interviews, as the sampling strategy deployed for the study “is a general approach to sampling in a qualitative inquiry that aims to identify participants who share the same experiences of a central phenomenon of study” (Kalu, 2019, p.2529). Interestingly, snowballing sampling is said to be a good technique when researching marginalised groups (Tracy, 2020), which at the centre of this study, women of Black and Coloured women who, in the research setting, are considered marginalised.

4.4.4 Sample Size

A valid sample size for the nature of this research is between 5 to 24 interviews (Hennik & Kaiser, 2022). For this study, the sample reached was twelve participants. According to Frechette et al. (2020), any number from five participants would be deemed as ‘enough’. point out that data from interviews comes from the richness of the data rather than the size of the sample.

4.4.5 Measurement Instrument

The study measurement instrument was an interview guide – see Appendix XX, guided by an interview guide, and the researcher as the interviewer. Concerning the study, the use of interviews as an instrument is because it is one of several most used methods and ways of gathering qualitative data (Tasci et al., in press). Using an interview process allowed the researcher to gain in-depth insights into the participants' views, especially their lived experiences. Additionally, the interview process as an instrument helped contextualise participants' responses on what they responding to and why certain questions were responded to the way they were, which added richness to data analysis.

4.4.6 Data gathering process

The phenomenological, inductive and interpretivism approaches gave way to the data-gathering process, which required the need for in-depth information from the participants to build towards answering the research question. Before collecting data, a process of getting ethical clearance was required – see Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Approval, notifying the researcher research proposal, methodology and gathering techniques are approved to conduct the study. As such, data collection was done through a structured interview process as the preferred method of data gathering. Structured interviews are a valid way of gathering data (Hartwell et al., 2019), in which situational interview questions were used to gather data required to unpack the lived experiences and answer the interview question. Hartwell et al. (2019) further highlight that structured interviews are the most frequently used interview process, where the interpretation of data comes from situational interview questions, which was the technique used in this study when interviewing the participants. This process linked well with the philosophy and research design, as the outcome of this process was obtaining individual experiences, values and interpretations for the study, which were then analysed for findings and discussion.

4.4.7 Analysis Approach

The data collected was qualitative, therefore rich in written and verbal information that required several steps of analysis and scrutiny at various levels. Although Lester et al. (2020) noted that thematic analysis is necessary for qualitative analysis and viewed it as a foundational element of making sense of the qualitative data. An overview of the analysis approach was conducted in the following sequence: a collection of recorded and written data – see **Appendix A**, Written notes, then the initial sorting of the data was done by doing an over summary of keywords, sentences, and themes picked up from the interviews. Thereafter, the first part of coding began putting the data into categories and themes (coding) to start answering the research question (and identifying gaps).

Figure 4.1: Coding Process

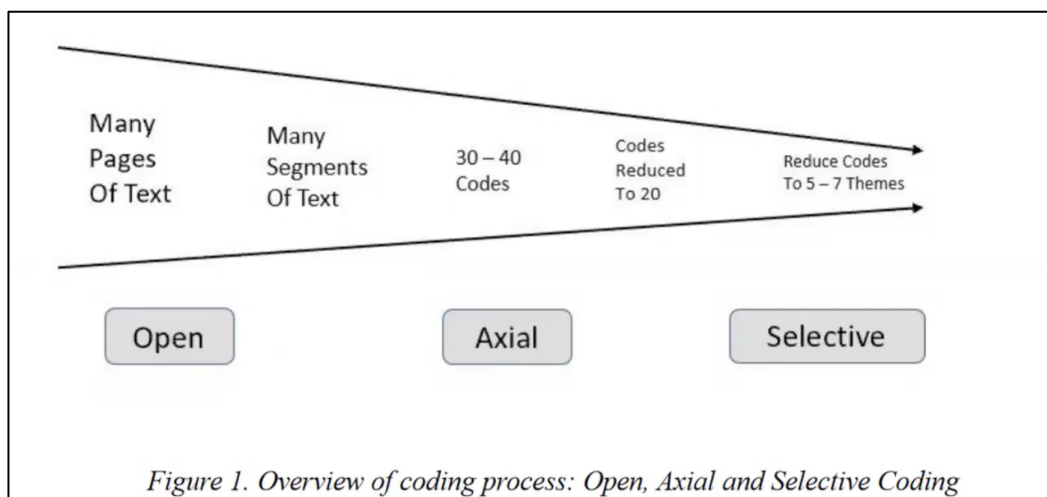


Figure 1. Overview of coding process: Open, Axial and Selective Coding

Source: GIBS Aspire

The data collected from the interviews was analysed using Computer Assisted Qualitative Analysis Software (CAQDAS), Atlas.ti. This tool was to aid with coding, categorisation, and grouping into themes, as well as the volume of data collected. Software tools, such as the one used to analyse the data, assisted with coding and putting the data into themes (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The tool-assisted with code and quotation management – see Appendix B: Coding Process. As the software was not entirely easy to grasp, the researcher's knowledge of analysing interviews from prior experience further supplemented the analysis approach, noting that “some researchers prefer to analyse data manually” (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p.203).

4.5 Quality Controls

According to Gill et al. (2018), the measures used to assess the trustworthiness and rigour of proposed research in qualitative studies are credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. For this study, additional quality control was an ethical consideration, which included procedural ethics (Tracy, 2020) for conducting the study before, during, and after the process. The study could pass the trustworthiness and rigour test by meeting this criterion.

4.5.1 Credibility

The major trustworthiness of findings is the researchers' interpretation of a qualitative study test its credibility (Gill et al., 2018). Tracy (2020, p.275) adds that a credible study gives the sense of being 'real', where the data can be used to "act and make decisions." The study used credibility through triangulation, which is a form of cross-checking from multiple sources (Solarino & Aguinis, 2020). Additionally, Saunders and Lewis (2018) point to the variability within the sample populations used to collect data, which was the case in this study. The participants had different backgrounds from various industries and were at varying levels of top management. This adds to the data's robustness (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Therefore, credibility is looked at in terms of whether the data gathered from the participants can be used to confirm a conclusion for the study.

4.5.2 Confirmability

Confirmability is the ability of the researcher to make assumptions and predict findings from interpreted data. Therefore, this measure seeks to identify assumptions influencing the research (Gill et al., 2018). For a qualitative study, this looks at how data collected and interpreted reflects the participant's experiences (Stahl & James, 2017). A quality check would include interview transcripts, consent forms and recordings used during the study.

4.5.3 Dependability

Dependability focuses on the researcher's approach to the study to ensure it yields the necessary results, and if the data was examined independently, the same conclusions would be reached (Gill et al., 2018). Dependability can be said to be "trust in trustworthiness" (Stahl & King, 2020).

4.5.4 Transferability

Transferability is the ability to make the research generalisable, where research can fit into another context assessed on similar principles. Tracy (2020) associates it with findings corresponding to something that creates resonance. What was of value with the study, where some of the participants were recruited through snowballing? Solarino and Aguinis (2020) noted that if the research is looking to be transferrable, convenience and snowballing sampling are helpful. In the case of this study, these were the sampling techniques used to recruit the participants.

4.6 Research Limitations

The first limitation was the submission of the research proposal was required before embarking on the study. The proposal is a detailed plan to answer the research questions, outlining sequential steps from the purpose to the procedure (Tracy, 2020). The initial research proposal submitted to proceed with the study lacked finesse in its objectives. The study was said to be too broad, with no clear research question(s) and questionable research methodology. In contrast to the feedback, the research questions were narrowed to the final three research questions – see chapter 3, that guided this study.

Kalodimos and Leavitt encapsulated some other limitations in the sample size. Firstly, due to the smaller population of this group of people, the difficulties in securing large numbers of senior leaders to participate in the study. Secondly, the nature of sourcing this sample population, usually through snowball sampling, the range of sample may also limit the study, and decision-making in general is hard to examine (Kalodimos and Leavitt, 2020). There were several limitations during the study, which will be sequentially noted. The research for this study was qualitative and, therefore, required extensive interpretation. As highlighted by Ravindran (2019),

elements that may limit the research include having too much data, where the researcher may not be able to code large volumes of data completely and precisely.

4.7 Conclusion

It is at odds, however, that qualitative data cannot be tested like that of quantitative data, where researchers are critical on the replication of research and transparency of quantitative data (Pratt et al., 2020). However, the 'richness' and authenticity of qualitative research lies in the interaction of people, in the same context that quantitative collects its data from. Therefore, instead of being critiqued, it should be considered complementary to another form of science, where everything does not need to be replicated, which makes qualitative research unique – that it cannot be replicated but rather adds to theories and context for future studies.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS & RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

The following chapter will analyse findings to answer the three-research question from chapter three, which focuses on African and Coloured women's involvement in, potential barriers to, and support of participating in strategic decision-making in their organisations considering strategic decision-making. The work below will present findings from interviews conducted, the method used and participant information. In addition, the results of the research will be evidenced with cited quotes from the participants' interview feedback and from the research questions, where study results and findings will be documented as part of the study, followed by the conclusion that will bridge the study to the discussion of the results.

5.2 Interview Details and Participant Journey

The initial plan was to interview women from the private sector in South Africa. However, with limited access to women in the private sector, the participant criteria were extended to all women who operate in medium—to large organisations (see **Appendix 5.1: Company size classification**), with two of the participants coming from the public sector.

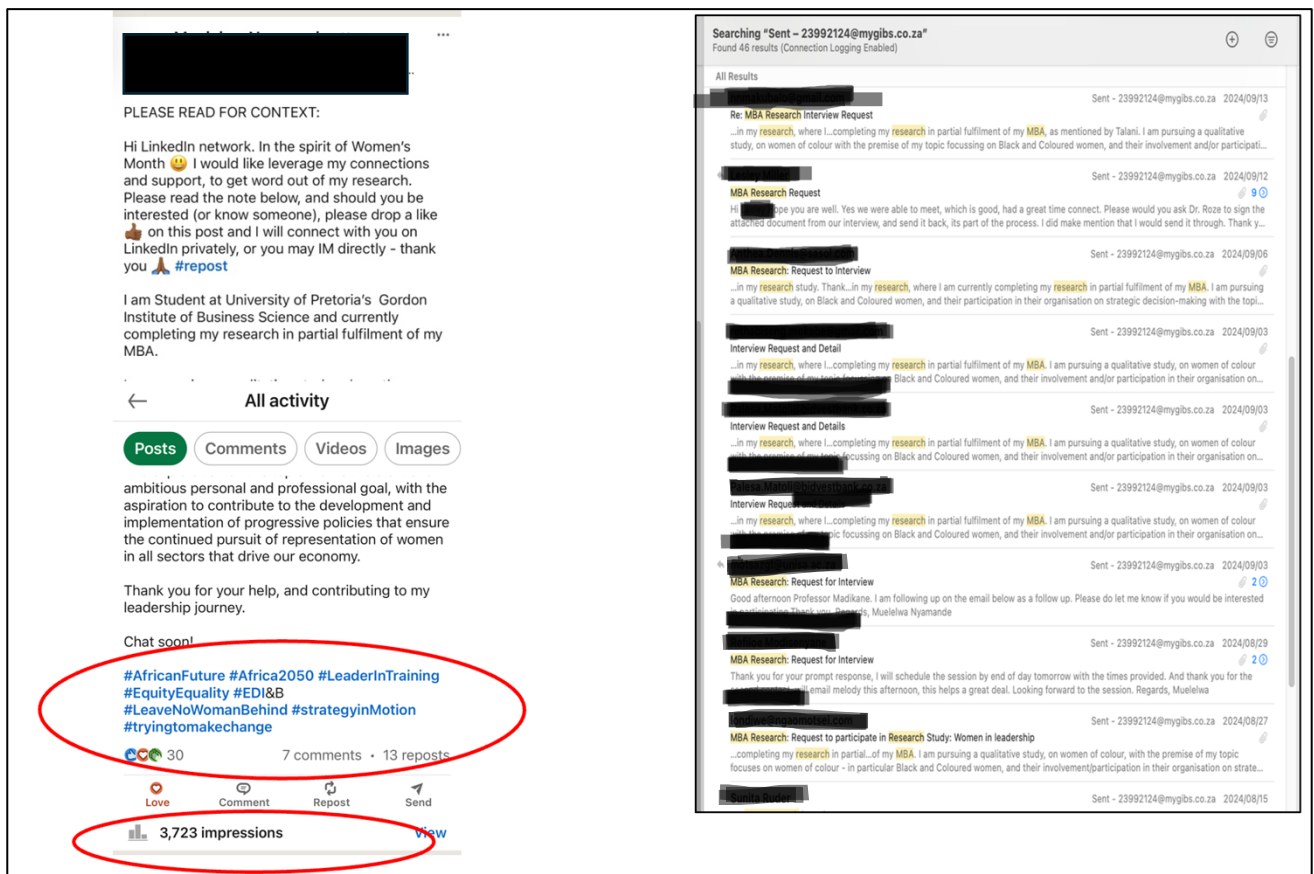
5.2.1 Data Saturation

The sample size of research of this nature, and saturation point is said to be 5 to 24 interviews (Hennik & Kaiser, 2022). For this study, the sample size of the study conducted landed on twelve (12) participants, who meet the criteria of the research study. From the study, data saturation was reached by participant nine (P7), however because of the nature of the questions, there were new themes that each participant had the was

5.2.2 Participant journey

As highlighted in the research sampling and size, participants were recruited through direct connect, and snowballing techniques. The first strategy by the researcher focused on the use of close networks to make connections with interested parties to volunteer to participate. This recruitment was done with the use of friends, colleagues, and classmates, resulting in the majority (60%) of participants being recruited from this technique, with the remaining participants recruited through snowballing. Simultaneously, the use of professional network 'social' media LinkedIn

Figure 5.1: Participant Recruitment & Participation Request



The result was that over 25 respondents participated in the interview. However, only 17 participants directly confirmed, with the eventual 13 participants heeding the call to take part in the study, which was the final number of participants that took place in the research study.

5.2.3 Participant Demographics

The key defining criteria for participation in this study was dependent on the participation of women on African and Coloured women in top management, that work in South Africa. The study was not specific to, industry (or organisation type), and was location agnostic (province), however, organisation size was criterion for all participating interviewees, with criteria stating medium to large organisations – see appendix 5.3: *Company Size Classification*. Table 1 shows an overview of women interviewed, with 23 per cent of the participants being coloured versus 78 per cent black women, which reflects their relational participation at the top management level versus African women.

The average experience of the interviewed participants was 17,5 years, where participants P3 and P7 were part of their graduate programmes that focused on accelerating leadership growth to top management in a short period, which the two acknowledged in their interviews.

Table 5.1: Participant Information

Participant Information Overview							
Participant Code	Occupational Level	Race	Gender	Years of Exper.	Industry	Province	Interview Method
P1	Top Management	African	Female	13	Financial Services	Western Cape	Google Meet
P2	Senior Management	African	Female	15	Public Sector	Gauteng	Google Meet
P3	Senior Management	African	Female	10	FMCG	Gauteng	Google Meet
P4	Executive Management	African	Female	21	Financial Services	Gauteng	Google Meet
P5	Top Management	African	Female	16	Public Sector	North West	Google Meet
P6	Executive Management	Coloured	Female	26	Consulting	Gauteng	Face-to-face
P7	Senior Management	African	Female	9	FMCG	Gauteng	Face-to-face
P8	Executive Management	Coloured	Female	21	Chemicals & Energy	Free State	Google Meet
P9	Senior Management	Coloured	Female	29	Automotive	Kwazulu-Natal	Google Meet
P10	Senior Management	African	Female	17	FMCG	Gauteng	Google Meet
P11	Top Management	African	Female	18	Automotive	Gauteng	Google Meet
P12	Senior Management	African	Female	17	Financial Services	Gauteng	Google Meet
P13	Top Management	African	Female	20		Gauteng	Google Meet

Industry classification only saw 16 per cent of the participants from the public sector, with the rest coming from the private sector. There were significant differences in P2 and P5 to the findings, to be discussed later in the paper. Most of the participants were working in Gauteng, which is the economic hub of South Africa, which again is relational to the economic concentration of the South African economy.

5.2.3 Interview Data Transcription

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and online through Google Meet. Most of the data gathered from the interviews was recorded, except one participant (P11), requesting that only written notes be captured. Interviews were recorded on a phone application and uploaded onto the researchers' Google Drive for safekeeping and further analysis. In addition, the researchers supplemented the recordings with their researchers' written notes captured during each interview—see Appendix 5.4: *Researchers notes*, as an additional vetting process should technology malfunction. Two pilot interviews were conducted; however, they were not included in the data analysis, as the two participants interviewed were closely connected to the researcher. Therefore, responses were with their biases to 'correctly' respond to the study.

5.3 Coding and Analysis

The coding and analysis of the interviews were conducted using Computer Assisted Qualitative Analysis Software (CAQDAS), Atlas.ti. the initial coding

5.4 Study Results Analysis

5.4.1 Result Themes

At the start of the coding process, there were over 75 codes identified using Atlas.ti, where analysis was focused on ensuring that key themes were correctly identified through the analysis process. A further iteration was done, where the grouping of codes (sub-codes) was reduced to 17 codes that were grouped into various themes – see Appendix 5.3: Codes, Sub-Codes and Themes. Much of the themes that were identified intersected well into one another, providing richer interpretation for the discussion of results.

The Below, will be a detailed view of the main themes that were common with all the participants, and contribute to answering the research questions from chapter 3.

These themes were also identified as important to the participants, as there was considerable time (5 – 15 minutes) speaking on the below.

5.4.1 General Background

The first noticeable theme that came through from all the participants was their educational achievement. In the interview, the question was focused on the participant's career background. However, all participants started narrating this from their qualifications, which resultantly went into their career background. Unsurprisingly, all the participants had a minimum of a National Qualification Framework (NQF) seven (7), with P3, P6, P7 and P8 having master's degrees in their respective fields.

This was evident with all the participants; however, it was more pronounced with the participants from the financial services and FMCG industry.

"I was in a meeting with quantitative analysts; that's a very specialised space, and in that space, there's just still too few women. I was the only woman of colour in a room of about 9-10 people, that's a crisis in my mind." (P1)

"One of the biggest challenges has been how I can be taken seriously because a lot of people have opinions about how women get into these roles. Even when you are in the role, there are instances that you are the last person they want to hear the solution from, and because of that I have had to work harder than the man in the plant to show that I am capable, despite the level of your degrees, that is not considered." (P7)

Beyond African and Coloured women in STEM, one other participant spoke that despite her extensive experience, status and qualification in the organisation, she was still not considered to be 'seen', stating.

“Even though I’ve got more degrees than the CEO, I noticed, and so did the team in the room, how disparagingly he used to speak to me, or just disregard what I have to say.” (P6)

What was evident from the participants is that the roles they occupied were not seen as being suitable for women, and they found themselves needing to prove themselves in their roles. The participants that were in technical spaces found that they were only brought into being credible once they could sustain performance within their operations, and that, too, came with its challenges. Despite being highly qualified, the participants acknowledged that this did not give them immediate credibility. Therefore, they had to work even harder to gain stakeholders’ trust. Moreover, the participants were aware that having educational credentials outside of their first qualification, would bolster their chances to gaining leadership roles in the respective career.

5.4.2 Career Journey

The nature of this study required that the participants provide details on their careers and how they got into their roles in top management. What was picked for more than fifty per cent of the participants were the career changes and sacrifices they had to make early on in their journey and their ascension to top management. They acknowledged that the change was pivotal to their journey, in which certain skills and experiences were picked up from those career decisions. One participant who has been in her organisation for 30 years spoke to this.

“The natural succession was becoming a principal engineer and post principal engineer that was the ceiling for women in the company, and definitely for women of colour. [...]. This means that I had to change disciplines to the current technical expertise I am in because I was told I was not good enough to be an engineer. I see the benefits of my decision now, even though I resented it at the time, but I think the benefits are coming through now.” (P9)

“I am a lawyer by profession, but I found myself deviating from practising law because of family dynamics. I was a practising advocate when we decided to move, and I figured that it would be hard for me to join the legal fraternity with not client base, so I looked for permanent work, I ended up in the municipality, and this is where the lawyer mutated into something else, where I now a specialist in my field.” (P5)

The career changes that the participants went through, were because of varying circumstances, where some were due to personal reasons and others due to the function of the jobs they were in, and the ceiling they had reached, and others wanting to accelerate beyond their current roles. What made the finding interesting was that many of the participants had to restart (go backwards) to move forward in their view.

“I started in talent sourcing as a specialist, did that for three years, and made a decision to start my career fresh with a graduate programme.” (P4)

Conclusion

From the participants, it was clear that to be where they are now, they had to make career choices in line with their skills and opportunities. Some were more intentional, while others made the change for personal reasons. What is clear is that no one participant had a linear career journey on their way to top management. What was a theme in these career changes, were the support systems they had in place to fall back on, making it easier to make some of the decisions they did. On support systems, that will be discussed further in the results

5.4.3 Experience as a Leader of Colour

The purpose of the engagements with the 12 participants was to focus on their leadership experiences as women of colour, having broken the glass ceiling. Although all the participants had varied career journeys, all the participants had similar experiences in leadership that spoke to, showing credibility upfront to get buy-in as the ‘outsider’, gaining trust amongst peers, and gaining the power of influence

on the back of achieving the first two characteristics. As this was the topic of discussion, there was rich data provided by the participants, and the below table outlines the experience of leadership and the themes by theme.

Table 5.2: Thematic Leadership Experiences

Theme: Leadership		
Sub-theme	Experience	Quote
Credibility	Gaining a technical qualifications	"...when you start passing and you start getting close to qualification, a lot of people jump at investing in you, because now you're becoming a rare commodity, and the business starts vouching for you." (P1)
	Future proofing leadership through upskilling	" I owe it to myself to acquire the skill, to learn the skills that I can deliver to the best of my ability. For my client, I think it's very important that I'm always, always able to deliver the best, because people are entrusting me, obviously, with delivering the wellness strategy, and in order for me to do that, I need to have the acquired the skills. So the skill set might change tomorrow. I must be able to deliver that, acquire the skill and come and deliver." (P12)
	Proving of oneself to show capability	"I find that we are also much more harder on ourselves as women. So if I look at our scope and what we've committed to the challenge to prove ourselves that you are capable as women, we've over committed. And not over committed to not deliver, because we will deliver by hook or crook. That's nonnegotiable" (P4)

Gaining trust	Building work experience	"So I learned how to lead them in my own way and get them to understand and trust me.." (P3)
	Gaining trust of peers	"I have not entered into a trust relationship yet where I can have that kind of authority. So I'm still earning my tribes in this one" (P8)
	Gaining trust as a leader from stakeholders	"I guess that's the privilege that you earn having displayed that your clients have your trust, your clients have your trust, therefore the business has your trust". (P8)
Influencing	Managing stakeholders in role	"I have to do a lot of lobbying and ensure that there's buy-in, so that is where you influence for resources etc. So reading the room is very critical to how I influence my strategy, get a wingman or woman and influence them" (P8)
		But I think I had that aha moment between the time I was at **Company X** and the time I was at *Company Y** where i realised that I don't need the same intelligence that I used to get to the position, but more of influencing my colleagues that are at the same level, that helps me in delivering" (P10)

Additionally, there was the reminder of the Glass Cliff effect, that women face constantly when they have broken the glass ceiling, only to face other challenges.

"...the world is far less forgiving of a person of colour, and especially a woman of colour. It's one thing to go and put a woman as your leader, it's another thing to buy into her. We have seen organisations where leaders

have been placed, but you know that board does not support that person, the organisation doesn't really support that person, which results in two-quarters of bad performance, and suddenly that leader is being told they must go, versus a male counterpart who occupied the role for six years of bad performance, and they were told to never leave.” (P1)

What is true about the participant's experiences, is that there were preconditions that had to be met before they were 'worthy' of their role. As the natural state of women is not to be leaders in many contexts, the participants had to use different approaches to ensure that they were considered, again, despite being appointed in these roles. Two outliers from the groups, P4 and P12, mentioned that in their current roles, because their leaders, a Chief Operating Executive (CEO) and Executive Head of Human Resources (HR), were female, they experienced less resistance, as they too were women of colour, who were aligned to their transformation agenda

Conclusion

Although all the participants were in progressive organisations from a policy aspect, the leaders alluded to having to be conscious of the value they bring in their roles. Having to work harder than their peers and sometimes going over and above the required standard got them into the room. What was evident with all the participants, is the recognition what got them into their roles, requires a shift in mindset from their perspective and within the organisation to make it easier for women and women of colour to transition into leadership roles, therefore ensuring that diversity interventions are ingrained in the diversity programmes for the promotion of female leaders.

5.4.4 Diversity in the Workplace

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) were key themes that resonated in all of the interviews. The participants all spoke to the necessity of why D&I is an important pillar to accelerate in organisations, as it includes all issues. However not all were fully

aligned with some of its intentions, as they spoke of not having solved the 'basic' diversity issues.

"I understand the need for diversity, however we have not got the basics right, and we are already mixing issues with inclusion, when you have not got the basics of who I am – being a black woman right. At this rate, it will take forever to be fully represented, cause everyone has an issue that can banded under 'diversity and inclusion' banner". (P11)

"I think the corporate environment, in my observation and personal experiences, is not necessarily designed for women, you know, in as far as accommodating them, and I mean, it's basic things like, you are justback from maternity leave, you are still nursing your child, and there aren't any facilities there." (P2)

Most found D&I beneficial in acknowledging the visibility for leaders and people to be more conscious about workplace dynamics but pointed out that it needs to be understood not as a KPI of numbers alone but as the backstory of its value for the organisation. Supplementing the value, they acknowledged the barriers they faced, even with an active agenda and policies in place, but many felt their organisations still did not understand the intent and need for this agenda.

"We're not making them believe in BEE, affirmative action, because they still probably think their jobs are at risk, but if you are still largely male-dominated, why is it that you still feel that your job is at risk? We are not making real progress, it feels like we are treating this with kid-gloves, you cannot treat diversity and equity with kid-gloves, it is institutional it needs intentional conversations, it need to move" (P3)

Where others had positive experiences in this space, talking about the intentionality and driving the key initiatives that make diversity tangible.

"...when you have a CEO who is female, you've got the Head of Credit, she is a female, you have the CRO, who's also a female, we are on the right track.

Our EE plan was specific that we are going to breach the African and Coloured gap, we are going to breach the gender gap” (P4)

“Being a black female has probably enhanced, or has supported, me to be honest, to actually progress, right? And I always say the time that we live in is a powerful time for black women when people are really driving the female agenda and the African agenda. I find myself in the corporate space at a very good time. I can see, the zeitgeist of these times, the fact that black females are like unicorn, and everybody wants a piece of them.” (P12)

Conclusion

Although there were varying views on the matter of diversity, what was clear to all the participants is that it is necessary for organisations to deal with equity in this way, as it has legislation as backing. What was a challenge was the level of commitment of some organisations and industries to genuinely want to create diversity through equality as a start and not create smoking mirrors with other pillars of diversity, which can then excuse corporate from dealing with the main issue – gender and race in the workplace.

5.4.5 Stakeholder Management and

Due to the level of leadership, a critical success factor was the management of stakeholders to ensure organisational success. Effective stakeholder management emerged as a theme from all the participants, who recognised that the ability to manage their stakeholders both within the organisation and externally fostered support from peers and senior executives, enabling the development and implementation of strategic initiatives. The participants understood that stakeholders within their locus of control had to be managed to ensure continued support from their peers and the business in general. **Table 5.3:** Stakeholder management captures the sentiments surrounding stakeholders and their relevance to strategic decision-making.

Table 5.3: Stakeholder Management

Stakeholders	
Participant	Quote
P1	"I have the industry as stakeholders. We have a place to play in this industry, and cannot downplay our contributuin to them and the business"
P2	"...there is a lot of networking and benchmarking on the decisions,, sometimes you would want to check how others are doing it and it helps, to ensure you get the best value for your stakeholders, which for us are the citizens of the province, first and foremost."
P3	"...for our stakeholders, we need to understand what the goal is, understand who's involved, who we need to pull in, as we are a high touch business. If anything goes wrong the impact is not only internal from cost resource wastage, but also from the customers that use out products. This is our reputation"
P7	"I have many stakeholders due to the nature of my role. Internally I have over 100 people's morale that needs to be maintained to get performance from the operation. I have internal experts that help drive the numbers to ensure productivity. But also have my peers, who drive end-to-end performance. At the end of the day the main stakeholder in customer, where I have to ensure the 100 stakeholders in here, are able to output for the stakeholders out there in trade."
P8	"My stakeholders extend outside as well communities, because the network that I'm responsible for spans across two countries, five provinces and over 25 municipalities."
P10	"I've got many stakeholders that support me, and the business, that help the business grow, I cannot exist in isolation. The strategic intentions require collaboration with stakeholders that impact where the business lands. There are daily decisions that impact where the business lands."
P12	"...my biggest stakeholder are the people that investment in the programme. My executive team want to see a return on investment in the programme.In essence my colleagues, my leadership team, all the people, my service providers, and all the people interanlly that help me deliver on the strategy."

Conclusion

Stakeholders are enablers of the sustainability of the organisations and influence strategic decisions (Whittington et al., 2020), which the participants were acutely aware of, and was an important piece of defining their success in their leadership roles. The below table is reflective of the importance of stakeholders for all participants.

5.4.6 Strategic decision-making

Despite the challenges women Black and Coloured women face in corporate, there are still success stories of women who were able break the glass ceiling, even though this number is still sparse. The most critical part of the study was identifying those

challenges, specifically the involvement (participation) in strategic decision-making in their organisations. The feedback from the participants varied, however for the most part, they all had experiences in this.

“...there is no decision that is made without me, as it impacts my clients. The overall business strategy I am involved in, as 50 - 60% of the business comes from what I do to attract more clients. My voice is heard because I know the client, and their needs, and the business must trust that I know what I am doing. That is the privilege of being of the role I play as the leader for my business and in the boardroom, where because of my impact and expertise, the business needs me to input into the overall strategy.” (P1)

“My involvement is at the strategy level because I'm responsible for the strategic plan for my unit, as well as in government, there's one, three, and five year strategic plan, where I am responsible for all of those, even though, at the level of the operational plan, it's the senior managers reporting to me that take charge” (P2)

Most of the participants spoke to the timing of the decision. Where one participant pointed out that strategic decision-making is not about signing things off in a board room, it is understanding that the business can pivot at any time, and a quick well-measured decision is strategic too, it is about the far-reaching implications of that decision on the business, what the business wants to achieve and the impact of the decision long-term.

“...a good decision needs to be considering the stakeholders. You need to have as many stakeholders as possible on board when making a decision. You should not compromise anyone. A good decision must take into account the company's future direction. And that is my role in the process, planning, deciding at the right time, under the right circumstances, and sometimes things happen, and the nature of the work requires that we think on our feet, and that could mean a shipment of the product not going out on time.” (P9)

Conclusion

The role that participants play in strategic decision-making, although vary, shows that the level of decision-making involves more than the act of it. Several considerations must be considered that impact how a decision is made and the impact therein. What is evident, is that all the participants take part in this process, as their roles form part of the value chain that contributes to the broader organisational strategy.

5.4.7 Resistance in the Workplace

Another pertinent theme that came through was the level of resistance the participants faced in their roles having reached top management, and how through their roles faced further undermining behaviour from peers, subordinates and even their bosses. This again showed the level of work female leaders must put in to be accepted in roles they have been appointed to.

*“...when I was in **Company Z** and joined I was deployed in a training centre that was full of whites, and I was the senior manager in that, I was met with a lot of resistance in terms of my decision making, and how I chose to run my division” (P2)*

“I know I am in line for his job, I am his successor, into the next level of senior management, and he sat me down and said to ‘you have to understand, I am not going to just step aside for you so that you take my job’, because that was what BEE was for him. Thereafter he made my life nothing but torment” (P6)

The same participant explained that in the next phase of her career where she was being groomed to take the reins of the organisation, found herself waiting for ten years, letting opportunities pass her by, as she picked as the successor.

“as a woman of colour, you are always the bridesmaid, never the bride, they knew what they were doing, and still kept me waiting” (P6)

What this spoke to in terms of resistance, is that the organisation and stakeholders did not see her for ten years as being suitable for the role, even after going through

programmes to get her 'ready', she was still never ready to take on a position of this stature.

Conclusion

Resistance of female leaders in these organisations showed the job to be done in getting women into more senior leadership roles, where they are 'steering' the ship and taking control. Most of those that needed to be bought into it, were unable to create a link between what and why, and out of fear, usually resisting the change. The resistance pertains to how many organisations are still homogeneous in their make-up, especially in leadership roles, there is no natural connection with women of colour taking or leading for roles where they are the ones to take charge. This was an apparent theme in all but one of the discussions.

5.4.8 Workplace Exclusion

Part of the silent protests that participants have faced in their roles, was being excluded from critical business activities, which showed itself throughout the interviews from undertones of the responses from the participants. This was greatly attributed to the cliques (or in-groups) that were formed from legacy working relationships, where people have been working together for long periods, due to the group being homogenous at that level.

"...at some point, there was a critical business meeting in my diary, with the partners who were generally white. The next thing I saw was that the meeting was no longer in my diary, as the nature of what they were going to talk about impacted me directly. That is when I realised that this is how the game is played. I tried to not overly internalise it, but I did feel very excluded." (P11)

"When we interact with the central office and MANCO, which is mostly men and white. That's when you feel that you are at the bottom of the food chain, nobody asks for your opinion." (P7)

"...challenges I have experienced, is mostly being ignored, and being a woman, it's a lot of being ignored, and being invisible, you get nasty

comments, sometimes excluded. And after a while one just gets used to it, but what hurts the most is being ignored, that creates an impact.” (P9)

One of the participants put into perspective the effects of the exclusion, where she highlighted the far-reaching impacts, it has on women of colour who are deliberately excluded, stating that.

“I see a lot of women being islands, some of the islands are self-created, but some of the islands are just function of unfortunately, just not having that support, that support, and I think that is one of the critical things that need to change because otherwise we're always going to keep saying so and so failed or so and so wasn't a good leader, and so and so didn't make bold decisions, and didn't do anything during her time.” (P1)

Conclusion

The exclusion of the women of colour many believed was deliberate and at most times, they had to force themselves into the group, but turning to specific agentic traits, where they were more demanding about being brought in the room, not because of the race or gender, but for exactly what they were hired to do. So, there was again the need to show credibility through their capability and skills, again having to claim their position in the rooms they entered. They had to be aware of when the exclusion was happening and find ways to be seen.

5.4.9 Leadership Self-Doubt

Several participants spoke of internal turmoil experienced when they reached top management, wherein they spoke of imposter syndrome and how that played a role in some of how they were treated as peers in their respective leadership teams.

“I have had moments where I've had to say to myself, ‘step up, step up to this role that you're in.’ It took me a while; I think I didn't quite trust myself. I mean, how on earth are people relying on me to comment on this industry.” (P1)

“Sometimes we are the enemy, and, in my case, I used to have that sickness of the victim, like you know you are there, show up in completeness” (P8)

“We have the tendency to want to prove ourselves. Sometimes, a man will be asked to do something, and he responds ‘no’; that is a complete sentence for him. Whereas women we need to justify everything and being unable to hold the line, we kill ourselves trying to prove something to everyone” (P4)

The imposter syndrome played a role in understanding that they needed to be able to be able to stand up for themselves in situations where they were not seen or heard. It felt less than others, as they had very few people in the room who could help them through their insecurities. As such, many of the women had to partake in ‘self-talk’ to get themselves out of their heads and into a participating member of the team.

5.4.10 Corporate politicking

Many of the participants spoke about the corporate games they found themselves having to play and what they observed, which seemed to be a prerequisite in sustaining oneself at the top. Although all of them spoke of their foundational values in how they got to the top, they recognised that being in top management was not as black and white as how they ascended into their roles, giving an interesting view of what that meant in their current roles.

“ most decisions are highly contingent on my ability to influence, but also, I need to pay attention and notice the trends on time, I need to have data to always justify my why, where then the other work has to happen, I have to do a lot of lobbying and ensure that there's buy-in, as that influences how resources like budgets are distributed.” (P8)

“I realised that I am playing a game in a different league, and I may not always going to be the preferred player.” (P11)

What stood out from the findings was what one of the participants dubbed, “pull her down syndrome”, which addresses how women work against each other in situations

where they find themselves to be the only ones, or the 'unicorn' the only female who has one the group over, so there is a threat to power dynamics.

Although it was not prevalent as an outright theme, many of the participants in their recommendations to what could work for them better, stood on women support one another when they have made it to top management.

“And then there are other women, she is a Queen Bee, and I don't mean in the Beyoncé kind of queen. She is a queen in the sense that when she reached the other side, she forgot that she was a woman, she forgot how she struggled to get there, and because of that, she thinks we all must go through it too. She is completely unsupportive; even if she thinks she is I call them the accidental diminishers, those that think they multiply, but they divide and diminish” (P6)

Conclusion

What came out of this theme, was the need for women of colour early on in their careers to understand that a great deal of being a leader goes beyond capabilities. There are other corporate skills, that can only come through experience, learning and sometimes mentorship that can help understand 'how to play the game'. However, what was called out in this regard, is that the counterparts always seemed more comfortable in understanding the dynamics in the boardroom, as they saw how men had 'each other's back' versus their experience as females, which was another theme that was picked from a many of the participants.

5.4.12 Support and Advocacy for women of colour

Despite the negative experiences that the participants continued to experience in their roles in top management, there were pockets of positive sentiments when it came to sponsorship they got when they managed to infiltrate the in-group, where Scheepers et al. (2018) pointed out the being sponsored, requires it to be done openly, which many of the participants alluded to in their feedback on navigating being in top management. They saw this as helping them get better acquainted with

their roles and with the in-group, which aided them in their participation in the decision-making process.

“So, sponsorship is something that I’ve seen in the organisation, it has led to the success of black females, who started from really small rural towns in the Eastern Cape, from being artisan and ended up as executives, solely on being sponsored, and the sponsorship together with mentorship being valued in the organisation.” (P8)

“I find that a lot of the time, I must push back on a lot of views, especially finance, who are usually the most valued player in the board room. So, my CEO largely understands the power of my function, so having his support helps me ensure that my voice is heard.” (P11)

“...she honestly gave me a tough time, but she was always there, you want to talk about sponsorship? I mean, there were things that she sponsored for me, where I was mentioned in rooms where I was not in because of her, and she did try to protect me in ways that she didn’t need to. Now I was pushed up the ranks by this person because she believed in me” (P6)

“You need a team that backs you, I’ve got a board that supports me, supports my plan, I’ve got the Exco that supports it, and they back it, and my leader gives me the freedom to do what I need to get the business and the people on the other side of performance, so everything is sponsored, my growth, development, and how I win in the organisation.” (P10)

Support, many of the women said, was pivotal to their success. Where they noted that this was part of their journey that enabled a smooth transition into top management, and whilst there, supported them in building their confidence to lead and learn. Two participants – P3 and P12, narrated that being sponsored requires vulnerability on the part of the women who are being sponsored, not to see it as a challenge of one’s capability, but rather as a platform to ensure that one lands ‘safely’, given the challenges faced by women.

5.4.13 Employment Equity Measures

Speaking on their organisations and the process of getting to top management, the participants acknowledged that EEA policies were pivotal in enhancing their and other females of colour's career advancement, and most continue to support these initiatives.

"Here we have slightly less females than males overall at the senior management level, with 55% being men and 45% being women. So one of the principles is that if a female executive leaves, they must be replaced by a female" (P2)

What was interesting to note from P2, who works in government, confirmed that they do not have an issue with women of colour at top management, but rather they need to maintain the status quo. Other participants spoke to how the Department of Labour was intentional about how the organisation implemented EEA measures within their organisations.

"We socialise the plan, and literally, everybody knows, and everybody does the support it. If you hire a non-EE candidate, whatever your reasons are, you will write a very long love letter, because we need to account to policy and our plan." (P4)

Although this was the case for some participants, others felt that the policies were working against them, which reinforced resistance people in the organisation, noting that policies such as BBBEE felt that they were not acknowledged in their roles

"I am the youngest in EXCO so there are all these dynamics at playing against me. For example, you are perceived as the triple-BEE candidate because people want to diminish your age and your qualifications" (P11)

Although affirmative action legislation has had great advantages for those previously disadvantaged, many organisations and those that make decisions and are exposed to it need to be bought into why this is necessary and internal programmes that are foundational in creating equity in organisations. What is clear is that top management

not only needs to support, which is evident, but they need to believe in what they do when it comes to this agenda

5.4.15 Motivational drivers

Despite all the challenges the participants encountered throughout their careers, up to their current roles, they were driven by different experiences that landed them in the same circumstance: that they had broken the glass ceiling. What served as a reminder throughout the engagements with all the participants is that there was a high level of self-belief and determination, as they all recognised that even in those challenges, with influence, it is still difficult, as the dynamics are different, one participant claiming

“They were all right, the books, the quotes, everything, it gets lonely at the top, and nothing prepares you for this” (P11)

Conclusion

However, all the participants spoke to their motivators related to giving those that come after them an ‘open door’ to make it easier than they had it. They spoke to some of the roles they took beyond their appointed roles as leaders, becoming mentors, coaches and sponsors themselves

5.5 Conclusion of Results

The experiences of women of colour in strategic decision-making and their roles in their organisations in South Africa reveal a complex interplay of resilience, cultural navigation and systemic challenges for some of the participants. Despite facing barriers, the participants demonstrated adaptability and leadership prowess, contributing to uniquely to their organisational strategies and outcomes. Their lived experiences highlight the necessity for inclusive policies and practices that not only acknowledge diversity, but actively support it at, within their organisations. These findings underscore the critical need for structural changes to foster and accelerate equitable workplace environments and forums that create opportunity for women of colour to contribute and be recognised and valued

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Introduction

The following chapter will bring together the elements of the study by examining the research questions. The first chapter brought to the reader the justification of the study, theoretical need and business case for the study. Chapter two (2) presented current literature identifying the potential research problem and illuminating the research questions. In chapter three (3), the research questions were posed, focusing on bringing to light the under-researched topic of women in South African organisations and their role in top management. Chapter four (4) then gave a view of the study's methodological approach to answer the research question. This led to chapter five (5), where the study's findings were articulated, with pertinent themes identified through the analysis process.

This chapter will examine the results, considering the research questions posed for this study. Here, in-depth insights into the findings in terms of the context of the research and literature are provided in Chapter 2. The focus is to compare findings with the literature, thereby highlighting the extent to which the findings answer the research questions. This study aims to uncover the role of African and Coloured women in their organisation as senior leaders in decision-making, considering the barriers faced by women of colour in the workplace. The following discussion will narrow the findings to the three research questions posed in Chapter 3.

The results showed that most of the time, African and Coloured women are involved in decision-making. Further findings highlighted a particular criterion that must be met for them to be brought into the decision-making process, outside of them being officially appointed in their roles at top management, was the need for them to come in with experience, to show credibility – through skills or capability, ability to influence key stakeholders, support from sponsorship and organisational intentional driving of the equity and diversity agenda. With that evidence presented, the following will discuss these findings in detail by answering research questions.

6.2 Research Question 1: Discussion of findings

RQ1: Are African and Coloured women **involved** in strategic decision-making in their organisations at top management?

The findings revealed that, although the women of colour experienced many challenges in their roles at top management, they are involved in strategic decision-making within their organisations. The findings spoke mostly to their career journeys into their current role and how they have been able to navigate them from their career experiences.

6.2.1 The Career Journey to Leadership

As was the case in the study, most participants confirmed involvement in the strategic decision-making process, with them confirming that they were considered a valued member of the team due to support received from the most influential team members. This came through strongly when the participants spoke about their career journey and mentioned that their qualifications were considered 'qualifiers' to 'sit at the table'. Bose et al. (2022) confirm that females in senior management are usually more qualified than their counterparts. This came across with more than 50 per cent of the participants, with most of them having STEM qualifications, which are highly in the South African context. This confirms current data in line with StatsSa (2024), on the higher number of females than males participating in educational institutions. Resultantly Brieger et al. (2019, p.499) emphasise that women invest more time in building their competence through education and business experience, where the "attainment of education of women is important for men's acceptance of women's ambition to pursue executive careers". This is in line with the findings, as most of the participants had pursued post-graduate studies during their careers and formed part of their plan to ascend the career ladder.

Despite their highly regarded qualifications, Wilkins-Yel et al. (2019) highlight that the marginalisation of women of colour in STEM roles, as an example, is more pronounced, where they face increased scrutiny, this is because even in those careers, women are not seen as the standard career holder, therefore women of colour stand out more (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019). This was the case as they ascended

into leadership roles. This ties in well with how women are judged in leadership, where Ponce and Rosette (2022) emphasise the recognition of white males as the standard of leadership, whereas black women are not considered in this regard at all. Although this was the case 40 per cent of the participants remained in their pursuing their careers in the qualification they had obtained, whilst the rest admitted to making career changes – changing their specialisation, company etc., as they saw it more fitting to do so to ascend into leadership roles. Ibarra (2005, p.8) qualified this transition mattered, is that the changes, “are fuelled by modifications in a person’s set of possible selves, such that discrepancies between present work identities and aspirations for the future widen over time”. Additionally, Bishu et al. (2023) explains by suggesting that women go through various life transitions, therefore the career choices they make align to that, whilst navigating stereotypes from society. Additionally,

As such, the career experiences of women of colour are vastly different from those of their peers. Outside of meeting the minimum criteria, there are other experiences they need to contend with in their roles at top management. The findings show that the women of colour were aware that having credentials in the form of qualifications is what would get them in the door, and evidence shows that to be the case.

6.2.2 Leadership experience and decision-making

The experiences of the participants in relation to decision-making was interesting. Although most of them were confirmed to be involved in the process, they were many nuances that they had to overcome in the process of getting decisions made and contributing to the organisational strategy. They were three main themes – credibility, trust and ability to influence, that were grouped as leadership experiences that contributed to how they were involved in the process.

6.2.2.1 *Showing Credibility, Gaining Trust*

Smith et al. (2019, p.1709) reminds us that, “marginalised group members are frequently invisible in terms of being recognised as legitimate authority figures and credible leaders and seek to gain this visibility as professionals”. The participants related their experiences of using their credibility to gain trust with their peers at top

management. This was done by showcasing of competence through performance, and not only from the authority of their as the appointed leader. This stems from how women of colour are typically viewed, where in society they are seen as working menial jobs therefore, “women of colour have focused on improving working conditions and opportunities (Holvino, 2010, p.252). Cha and Roberts (2019) explain this, saying that minority groups tend to work harder to prove their competence and counter negative stereotypes associated with their identity group, which depicts how women of colour can show up, and be viewed as credible and competent, through the cancelling effects.

Outside of working hard, women are said to need to, “take on challenging tasks to achieve promotions”. (Shinbrot et al., 2019, p.123). Because women of colour are judged by their multiple identities or intersections, black women in top management tend to have a degree of agency that distinguishes them credibility (Smith et al., 2019). Additional Glass and Cook (2020) admit this stating, to achieve credibility, women of colour may need to act in ways that create an impression that they fit into the role of leadership (Glass & Cook, 2020), therefore, their inclusion at the top does not get questioned. Although none of the participants mention anything about misalignment to their values or the like, what was evident is the recognition that they had to ‘play the game’ differently.

On the other end of credibility was trust, where all the participants were clear on the brief, if you perform you gain credibility which builds trust. One of the participants mentioned that performance cannot be questioned as its black or white, that is when they begin to trust you. This was a key success factor when we spoke to their managing of them being women of colour. Legood et al. (2021) engaged in the concept of cognitive trust, which involves assessing an individual’s skills and whether they are dependable based on prior experiences with the individual, beyond the professional role. This relates directly to the finding that the participants aligned their acceptance into the group when they started showing positive performance, and not for being the management team. Another participant was deemed to be trusted with the job, this gave them a better chance to be considered as part of the group.

Although RCT speaks on the rejection of women as leaders, newer studies are moving towards the notion that communal attributes that women possess as being

functional in today's organisations. Therefore, there is recognition on how women build trust, where they focus more on team dynamics – conflict resolution, transformational leadership to get things done, and is seen as their unique way of building trust (Shinbrot et al., 2019).

This brings into view specific skills and behaviours women must lean into, for buy-in from stakeholders that help make them successful in their roles. A critical success factor in the decision-making process, is the ability to engage, manage and influence stakeholders, bolster building leadership experiences.

6.2.2.2 Stakeholder Influence and Management

The management of stakeholders strongly influenced the participant's ability to quell RCT resistance. At top management, the ability to influence stakeholders is one of the key enablers to success in a leadership role. Whittington (2020) indicates that one can influence organisational strategies by influencing stakeholders and exercising different strategies depending on their power and attention. All participants understood the need to use influencing tactics across the stakeholder network and in their roles, showing that "how managers talk about strategy also positions them in relation to others" (Whittington, p.192), where Burbano et al. (2023) confirm that the role one occupies does give weight to how one influences. Why influencing is an important skill, is that at that level of leadership – which is strategic, leaders need to influence individuals at same or higher echelons of the organisation and external stakeholders (Samini et al., 2022).

Notably, all the participants spoke of adjusting how they influenced their stakeholders, depending on what they needed to influence in the strategic decision-making process. Additionally, they saw a need to enhance this skill as they moved up into more senior roles, and eventually into top management. Trzebiatowski et al. (2023, p.801) supplement the above, taking from their research that female directors do adapt and learn tactics on how to participate on gendered boards, concluding that females in leadership roles "use specific gendered participation tactics over others to effectively achieve their participation aims, which in turn avoid backlash". This is important, as DiTomo (2021) calls out that racial hierarchy does influence how a the ingroup is managed, therefore, an important skill for women of colour to harness

in their roles. Admittedly, sixty per cent of the participants spoke about developing tactics to gain an advantage across their stakeholder matrix, understanding that much of the influencing required is outside of the room.

6.2.2 Leadership

Building on the work from SRT, Eagly and Karau (2002) examined the social categorisation of females in an organisational context, where the authors found that the archetype of leaders, fitting of societal constructs and gender bias, that men over women are preferred as leaders (Yang et al., In Press), which is the premise of role congruency theory. RCT posits from social categorisation that stereotypes are formed on preferred leadership traits, where “women are insufficiently agentic to occupy leadership roles” (Rosette, 2016, p. 429), a common finding from the experiences of the leaders participating in the study. Interestingly, Triana et al. (2024) put forward that women are usually rejected in ‘unnatural’ roles (i.e. Female Mechanical Engineer), whereby possessing agentic leadership behaviours creates further paradoxes for the leader. This meant that despite fitting into the stereotypical leadership characteristics, female leaders were not fully embraced in their roles and had to show their leadership in other ways. Women of colour had to contend beyond their backgrounds, they had to further deal with inconsistent standards of being a woman and being a woman of colour.

6.2.2.1 Decision-making involvement

The purpose of leadership is to work through the complexity of a dynamic business environment, where the business’s ability to remain sustainable is its ability to maximise resources through strategic choices. Strategic decision-making is influenced by the traits and unique characteristics of decision-makers, particularly those in top management roles. Considerations such as age, gender, race, education, experience, and tenure reflect the beliefs and values of these leaders, which ultimately shape their decision-making capabilities and actions (Fernando et al., 2020). In addition, Hodgkinson et al. (2023) highlight that top management biases impact strategic decisions therefore, organisational outcomes, where research suggests that “decision-makers often interpret signals through gendered filters (Yang

et al., in press, p.4), as such, would be the reason why having diversity in the organisation, in the room of decision-makers is important.

The study found that most women in their roles are involved in the decision-making within their organisations and have a role to play in the decision-making process of the strategy. Shepard et al. (2020) explain that an organisation's success is shaped by the decisions made by its top management, coming through with 75 per cent of the participants confirming that they are fully involved in and participate in their strategic decision-making, whereas the remaining participants spoke to not being part of the process end-to-end, only leading for the strategy at implementation and execution phase, despite their being in top management team (TMT).

This is a critical finding; where Shepard and the authors speak to the success of the organisation, Boone et al. (2018) elaborate that having diversity within your top management allows the organisation to use their expertise, experience, skills and varied perspectives that create and help stimulate constructive conversations, debate and fosters effective decision-making. Research indicates that women's influence in the decision-making process at top management relies on the number of women on boards or top management, where they are seen as "tokens" without the numbers (i.e., more women in top management) Buerter (2021). The participants recognised that having diversity versus homogenous teams made better-quality decisions for strategy development and decision-making than when they first came into top management as the 'only ones' in the room, which notably had little impact.

Conclusion

The findings were strong on confirming that women of colour do have a role to play and participate in their decision-making processes within their organisations. This however came with several conditions and was not a 'straight pass'. Those conditions were met through their ability to gain specific skills, but also gain an understanding on how things are "done around here", that is learning the culture at the top, which is different with regards to how one manages the playing the game (Glass & Cook, 2020). With this positive finding, what needs to be ventilated are the many challenges they faced in the form of barriers to get them to this point in their careers as well as in their roles at top management.

6.3 Research Question 2: Discussion of findings

RQ 2: What barriers do African and Coloured women face in their roles in top management and their participation in strategic decision-making?

The organisation for women of colour is complex, with unique barriers impacting their participation in top management and decision-making. What was common in the barriers faced, was the recognition that they had to be part of the in-group to start benefiting from their roles in top management. The experiences confirm how being women of colour, one still maintains the status of the 'outsider', therefore can be present and involved, and still not be fully included or benefit from being an insider (Sales et al., 2019). The next part of the discussion will delve into findings on the participants' experiences on the barriers faced throughout in their role, and in the decision-making process.

6.2.3 Race and Gender

The representation of females at top management is a symptom of inequality that persists within societies (Georgeac & Rattan, 2019). The findings show that race and gender as prevalent in the shape of the organisation, and the representation of leadership teams in top managements teams, and other teams within organisations. This confirms that organisations are controlled by prototypical white male (Ozturk & Berber, 2022), and that leadership roles are associated with males (Hoobler et al., 2019). The participants were aware of their reality, understanding that the system still required an overhaul in understanding where to place race and gender openly, beyond the EEA, and 'HR policies'. Therefore, when that the participants spoke on their experiences, they used race and gender interchangeably when speaking on diversity, recognising that depending on the experience either being female, or being African or being both could act as a barrier.

As the study's setting are organisations in South Africa, it is essential to remember that organisational power holders are traditionally white males, who "can define reality in accordance with their interest" (Ozturk & Berber, 2022, p.231), which can be seen in the division of race in management echelons (see figure 1.4 xx). In South Africa this is more nuanced, as race and inequality are the backdrop of the reality of

the system that this study is based on, and the findings suggest that this remains as evidenced in the findings.

In her seminal work on SRT, Eagly (1987), argued on two approaches associated with sex differences of structure and culture. On the one end, behaviours are associated with the commonality of experiences by a group with similar social structures and positioning in an organisation. Whereas the culture is set on the values and ideas socialised from childhood, where shared values are developed (Eagly, 1987), resulting in specific behavioural tendencies and roles associated with a specific sex. As such, role congruency theory, as an extension of SRT, stems from the prejudices from gender expectations, where;

“...perceivers judge women as actual or potential occupants of leader roles because of inconsistency between the predominantly communal qualities that perceivers associate with women and the predominantly agentic qualities they believe are required to succeed as a leader. People thus tend to have dissimilar beliefs about leaders and women and similar beliefs about leaders and men.” (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p.575).

From the findings, the results suggest that all the women experienced incongruency at the onset of their careers. They all confirmed that their race first then gender was a demarcation for they were treated differently, even though differences were subtle. Although all the organisations were on board with diversity management initiatives and policies, the study found that these interventions were generic. Yang et al., (in press) holds this against the narrative that societal expectations are linked to sex, where women are deemed as ‘low status’ in their roles they should occupy. With the caveat in South Africa This this view continues to show itself in how these women noticed that they were treated when they started in their roles, and how this created barriers to opportunities.

Much on the results on race were experienced in their earlier years of leadership of the careers, noting that, through the years they have found mechanisms and systems to deal with race-related issues in the workplace. Through the years of building management experience, there was better navigation of dealing with discrimination, microaggressions and other race related issues. What was a highlight, however, is

that race was still a social issue that they had to deal with, however was not as overt as the gender.

6.2.3 Workplace barriers: Resistance

In her recent paper, DiTomoso (2021, p.2032) explicitly called out that “racial hierarchy has been insufficiently addressed in the growing literature on diversity, equity and inclusion”, where discussion on racial hierarchy and discrimination have replaced discussions by inclusion, which has found the spotlight in many organisations. What was of particular interest, one of the participants, who had a highly specialised qualification, mentioned that before she was promoted to top management, she would do the menial work, and her colleagues – usually white men, would take on the work that got them in front of the right stakeholders, thus showing off their candidacy for future roles. It took a stakeholder to call this out, asking her to be involved in future sessions as the main speaker or the organisations would not invest. This aligns with the literature where McCluney and Rabelo (2019) give light that Black women navigating elite spaces will want to gain acceptance by performing tasks that align with stereotypical views of Black women, i.e. the caretaker, rather than taking on a role as a subordinate rather than a leader or a peer.

Although these leaders establish rapport and have the opportunity to participate in strategic decision-making, the findings were supplemented with challenges faced by the leaders. As noted in literature by Bishu and Headley (2020), women continue to face barriers even when they have attained leadership roles. The participants candidly expressed that barriers were not always within the core TMT but also within their teams (from subordinates) and organisational structures (policies) that created barriers for them to perform effectively. Thinking of RCT as discussed earlier, the stereotypes and prejudice held against women continue to hold women to a different standard, where they “incur penalties” confirm that Rosette et al., (2018) women face barriers at every stage of their careers, in which Smith et al. (2019) extend this further from their findings that black women experience their race and gender as barrier.

The study found that, despite being duly qualified and building credibility amongst their peers, they still faced barriers in their roles. What was of interest is that all the

organisations had policies and initiatives in place for the advancing of this agenda, in which most benefited from in getting into their roles. Glass and Cook (2019, p.1246) explain this by offering that, although the effectiveness of organisational transformation programmes varies and have yielded successful results, the barriers faced by women of colour that have reached top management is reliant on their ability to excel significantly (beyond their peers) and be able to master the unspoken rules of the “game, and through hypervigilance”. This word plays of ‘the game’ clear in the findings suggesting that more than skill, capability and showcase of performance, there were other unwritten skills and rules women of colour had to navigate in top management.

Reasons for these barriers, as Zheng et al. (2018) explain that women are more pronounced in environments (and roles) dominated by males; thus, their status as a minority and ‘tokenism’ becomes more visible. This minority status is compounded in the case of women of colour, as they are non-prototypical in many contexts due to a legacy that legitimises organisational stereotypes and structural biases, setting barriers for them to exercise their power (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). The authors further argue that a “plausible explanation for the undermining these leaders in positions of authority includes dissonance associated with conferring power to low-status groups, generating resistance and unease from the dominant power” (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019, p.146). This has created the barriers that exist in South African organisations today, where the lack of opportunities to

The study, through analysis, found that most of the participants had experienced being overlooked for key opportunities in their existing and past organisations, pointing out the amount of time they had to “wait their turn” before being considered for roles in top management. Outside their experiences, women must contend with discrimination and hostile work environments and make trade-offs, which are usually negatively perceived to get into leadership roles (Sánchez & Lehnert, 2019). Many of the participants experienced discrimination and hostile environments that kept them from progressing, taking note that most of this discrimination was not overt.

What is of particular interest was findings reflected on being deployed to their current roles as strategic moves, where they noted on arrival that the business was a ‘mess’, which they were invariably tasked to turn around. Women will “receive greater

scrutiny and criticism than men and be evaluated less favourably, even when performing exactly the same leadership roles as men” (Ryan & Haslam, 2007, p. 550). On this, the participants found themselves working harder than their peers, again repeating that what mattered was turning the numbers around; this was more evident in those women in operational roles. Cha and Roberts (2019)

This comes from practices and policies embedded within organisational structures, with Padavic et al. (2020) reporting in a Harvard Business School Alumni study that over 70 per cent of men and women attributed the lack of advancement by women to them prioritising family over work. The authors also said that men have had to juggle family obligations and could still advance (Padavic et al., 2020). From these findings, some of the participants validated this, having experienced this, comments such as being emotional, being financially excluded (not being paid as the ‘new pregnant hire’), and even being told upfront that they do not belong, were some of the ways that created barriers to their advancement into these leadership roles.

6.4 Research Question 3: Discussion of findings

How do organisations **support** the participation of African and Coloured women in strategic decision-making?

What is evident is that racial and gender transformation in South Africa remains a challenge; even with legislation such as the EEA and other affirmative action policies, the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles is still prevalent (Women in Leadership, 2023). The participants confirmed that all their organisations do report on and have governance measures in place that aid the facilitation of the EEA. Admittedly, majority of the organisations spoke to not meeting the legislated ask on the representation of women in top management.

6.4.1 Sponsorship

From the respondents' perspectives and findings, there was a consensus that support in one's career was pivotal in getting into top management. This created an anchor of support and allyship once in the role, making it easier for respondents to

navigate such roles. Scheepers et al. (2018) confirm this by suggesting that effective sponsorship must be overt, a sentiment that was held by many of the respondent. P8 spoke highly of how sponsorship played a crucial role in rise from rural town to executive. Similarly, P11 and P6 talked to the substantial of having influential leaders and managers supportive of their development, ensuring recognition and inclusion in important discussions.

Several participants spoke to how having a career sponsor and sponsorship became a helpful measure to accelerate their careers initially, and once at top management and getting buy-in from their peers. Scheepers et al. (2018, p.468) speak to how sponsorship assists women of colour by “open[ing] up their networks to their protégées and galvanise the support of others by using political clout to navigate key people”. Sponsorship helped with navigating the dynamics of being in senior leadership while getting acquainted with their roles and learning how to manage boardroom politics. Kossek and Buzzanell (2018), call out explicitly that for women to have any advantage in their roles in senior management, they need to be advocated for, and sponsored. What added credibility to the sponsorship, was who was sponsoring them. This was a critical finding, as the contrast of having the right initiative in place, can also have damaging results.

Findings also pointed to policies and initiatives the organisation had in place that focussed on the acceleration of gender diversity, where coaching, leadership development and mentorship were the main initiatives that were used. They were organisations that were specifically intentional on grooming underrepresented groups (including LGBTQI+), that saw the increase and movement of these groups in the organisations. However, what remained evident was the need for continued support in and out of the ‘boardroom’, to assist with navigating leadership was the role that sponsorship played.

6.4.3 Legislation and Organisational policies

Carrim and Nkomo (2016) articulated this, noting that much of unlocking barriers and creating opportunities for advancement depends on the recognition of the system and institutionalised process to move away from focusing on single identities – gender only, but rather understanding that individuals – such as women of colour,

having multiple identities. The respondents conveyed that the support measures in the organisations needed to be more intentional about understanding this agenda. What this looked like was complete support from the topmost influential leader in the organisation to sponsor and support the agenda. Further findings showed that for the agenda to move beyond policies, there was a need for internal governance measures to drive EEA measures and the need for agenda advocates from the top, as previously highlighted. More than anything, being advocates themselves as women in top management helped drive the agenda forward; even as a 'one-man-band', all the participants believed that the advancement of women of colour was a relevant strategic agenda that required not just lip service, but financial investment.

The findings showed that, although organisational policies and supportive structures are important in getting women of colour to be fully involved, the findings did show that a comprehensive approach needs to be taken to dealing with how women are onboarded into top management that fosters a culture of acceptance, visibility, and equitable leadership presence.

6.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, Chapter 6 has comprehensively analysed the lived experiences of African and Coloured women in top management within South African organisations. The findings highlight the significant contributions these women make to strategic decision-making processes despite the persistent barriers they face. Through the lens of intersectionality and role congruency theory, it is evident that their unique perspectives and leadership styles are invaluable to their organisations. However, the journey to achieving true representation and equality in top management remains ongoing. This chapter underscores the importance of continued efforts to address these challenges and promote a more inclusive and equitable corporate environment for women of colour in South Africa. As we move forward, it is crucial to build on these insights and implement strategies that support and empower these leaders, ensuring their voices are heard and their contributions are recognised.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The following chapter is the final chapter, summarising and concluding the study's findings related to the research aims and answering the research questions. This chapter will begin with a summary of the study's key findings, addressing the research questions and aims. The next part of the paper will review the study's contributions to theoretical and business implications; thereafter, it will provide recommendations for organisations and outline the managerial repercussions thereof. Finally, the conclusion will discuss the study's limitations and weaknesses in the paper and conclude the study by providing considerations for future research and closing remarks.

7.2 Study and Key Findings

As a reminder, the research aimed to understand three things: the contribution of women of colour in strategic decision-making in their organisations, confirming that they have a significant role to play as leaders in their organisations despite facing barriers in their roles and contributing to the limited research on female leadership at top management from a South African context. A study of this nature matters, as it brings light to the fact that interventions and legislations in place in South Africa have been able to do a marginal job in improving the representation of women, only in small groups. However, this representation of women of colour must be reflected in all parts of the economy, across all levels, and, more importantly, at top management.

Although these results answered research questions, literature and reports continue to show that women, particularly women of colour, are still underrepresented in decision-making roles, perpetuating gender inequality (CEE, 2024) in South Africa. The results confirmed that women remain underrepresented in top management despite reforms aimed at redressing this issue. They continue to face barriers even when they have become part of their organisational TMTs. Their participation in top management is certainly possible with intentional support from the organisation, legislated reforms, and targeted internal initiatives.

Women globally are said to be underrepresented in all spheres of society, and the UN Women, together with the sustainable goals and other global initiatives, need to see the emancipation of girls and women politically, socially and economically (UN Women, 2023). Additionally, the World Bank Group (2024) stress that if there is continued inequality between girls and women, Africa as a region cannot recognise its full potential in human capital development.

Why does this matter? The significance of this matter is that, not only economically but also in advancing women's participation in the economy, as noted by Kaufmann and Derry (2023), who take note that women having full access to the economy has more benefits than just the bottom line, but they can assist with socio-economic transformation and develop solutions for both the economy and society. What remains true is that closing the gender parity gap in South Africa remains a challenge, with the private sector and multinationals showing 29.6 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively (KMPG, 2023). Having women being able to participate equally, allows them to contribute to meaningful societal development challenges as well as their economies (World Bank Group, 2024).

7.3 Study main contribution

The main contribution of this study is to assess whether women of colour in South Africa are included in critical activities in top management, confirming they are no longer perceived as diversity 'tokens. This study did not look at the representation of women of colour in the generic sense but rather was specific to strategic decision-making, which is at top management. Samimi et al. (2022) confirms that this process has major implications on the allocation of resources and implications for the organisation.

What was well-researched and known is that globally, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles (Bishu et al., 2023), and reaching parity will require more than legislation, policies and organisational measures. Research showed for gender parity to be achieved, there needs to be a financial investment in addressing gender equality, such as Gender Lens Investing (GLI) Kaufmann and Derry. Although what is known is clear, there is another side of this that literature has

not been able to well establish and articulate as a topic on its own, and this is the first management study that is related to the gender and race of black women in top management. Although, as a theory, intersectionality has done a lot for bringing the plight of women to light, the only critique of this is how management studies have extended intersectionality to every other identity, which, in a way, waters down the theory's intent.

Management studies also call out that little is known about the processes used at top management and how strategic decisions. Additionally, Amayah, Haque (2017), and other scholars call out that not much is done on studies out of the West and European context. In addition, there were minimal studies on decision-making. that considered through an African context, rather than Africa was grouped with developing countries, which have different business and cultural nuances that are also unknown in relation to this. Therefore, findings from those studies cannot be generalised.

The study answered three main questions related to women of colour in top management, firstly do they contribute to decision-making in their organisations, secondly what barriers they have faced in their roles through this process of decision-making, and finally how their organisations support them in the decision-making process and how. These questions were answered through a qualitative process that included interviews with women of colour in top management, through that a process of findings, data analysis was used through an axial coding process, to get to the results that were discussed in chapters five and six respectively.

7.4 Limitations and future research directions

The first limitation of the study was accessing quality-rated journals (AJG 3+) for the literature section of the paper, where literature obtained on Black women in Top management was from a Western or European perspective. The Use of Google Scholar searches used words like, “Women of colour in leadership in Africa”, “African leadership”, “women entering the workplace”, ‘Women in strategy in developing markets”, and so on. The search yielded many results, most of which were poorly cited and not rated. Nkomo (2021, p.215) acknowledged that literature on race in management is still lacking and criticised the academic fraternity calling out the need to “de-centre” white males as gatekeepers of knowledge. Therefore, linkage of lower-

ranked literature to highly rated was a solve in this regard to ensure robustness of the literature being presented. This being the case, writing this paper was one of the research aims, to add to the limited literature on African leadership in management studies from an African perspective.

The second limitations were linked to the study itself that were uncovered during the writing of this paper, including:

- Participant scheduling constraints: With participants that agreed to the study, scheduling of interviews from confirmation to actual interview usually took a week due to participants' availability, where through the process, three participants missed interviews and did not reschedule due to availability
- Time frame: From the time of receipt of permission to conduct the study to the presentation, there were five months to complete the study.

As the researcher, this study was closely related to the researcher's own experiences, as they were professionally and intimately involved in similar topics in their own organisation. Therefore, there was bias in conducting the study, and the development of the interview guide as an example was based on the researcher's lived own experiences on the subject. Stahl and King (2020) confirm this as normal, acknowledging that conducting qualitative research inherently has biases linked to it, and would be "naïve" to think that they are not present.

A final limitation is the limited number of women in top management positions in South African organisations. Because the numbers of these women are small, getting participants to take part in the study proved to be challenging initially. Additionally, due to the nature of the study, there were many reservations about the extent to which the information would remain confidential and the level at which one could 'go deeper' without compromising themselves or their organisations. Although the sample size was met, more data from a bigger pool of top management would have solicited more information on this topic.

As this study was answering a phenomenon of lived experiences by women of colour in an organisational setting, future studies can take a longitudinal approach to the study, that focusses on women in the pipeline to top management and cover their

journey to uncover barriers pre and post appointment at that level. the cross-sectional study, although answers the question, does not do justice in unpacking the nuances that keep women 'stuck' in the middle.

7.5 Contribution to the scholarly debate

The debate on the representation of women in leadership is the same as it was today, versus when management studies on women entering the workplace started in the early 90s. There is no debate more important than what governments, together with institutions, need to redress gender parity – that is at a global level. Further contributions from this body of work need to start urging scholars to take Africa seriously. By this, what is meant is that research that is funded and rated needs to be what scholars aim to achieve, as there is a great opportunity to learn about future leaders from this continent.

7.6 Business Relevance for the Study

The relevance of this study for South African organisations is that it sheds light on, firstly, the potential of female leaders and the role they play within their organisations. What is clear is that women can get the job done! They are ambitious, usually educated, and when sponsored and supported with the right initiatives, they are valuable to the organisation. However, beyond this, organisations need to recognise the potential damage they impose on women and women of colour by not adhering to EEA legislation and organisation initiatives. Part of solving the solutions for South Africa needs to come from the majority who live in it, that is, women and women of colour, with the support of the males, who are still one of the organisation and, therefore, the institutional systems

7.7 Recommendations

This study initially attempted to unpack what happens with women who have broken the glass ceiling in their organisations. Although that is a broad question to answer, it requires research. Much of the research has focussed on the barriers experienced by women and women of colour in general, where the focus was on how females

have broken the glass ceiling and newer research on the glass cliff effect. However, what was evident in the literature is that not much is known on strategic making in top management (Shepard et al., 2020) therefore, it remains that studies on the topic of strategic management in TMTs need to shed light on the importance of future leaders and scholars to bolster the leadership knowledge on how to manage in the new world of work.

Several recommendations and business implications from the study can be considered beneficial in organisations that came from the findings.

1. Legislation on the advancement of women participating in senior roles needs to be aggressively applied by giving organisations stricter rules to comply with minimal loopholes for the lack of adherence, i.e. paying a fine can no longer be sufficient
2. There needs to be a mandated policy on the investment of women in leadership, where there is a clear line in the 'P&L' investable initiatives that drive the advancement of women (and not training budget reporting).

Nothing will happen until money matches targets, and the gender and race parity gap will widen. Therefore, inventions such as the abovementioned can align with this. Schutheiss (2021) comments that women's development can align with strategic organisational initiatives, and metrics can demonstrate impact at both levels.

3. Talent management practices should be intentionally planned based on specific leadership capabilities required in top management, and a pipeline should be proactively built within organisations for this. This requires – see point 2, investment upfront, supplemented with coaching, sponsorship and mentoring
4. Organisations can create new roles for women to build future-ready leaders for the organisations. In tough economic times, it is not about increasing headcount, but instead growing exposure through strategic projects and roles that can be created for women of colour, such as 'grooming' dock and pipeline for organisations
5. Build retention strategies that ensure women of colour are economically empowered and financially secure in the top management. This retention is

on the ownership of organisations through equity, not only money in the pocket. This will have a direct impact on BBBEE scorecard points, impacting the organisational bottom-line

The study found that not all women of colour experience barriers, which, like most research, is an outlier. Therefore, future research should take a different approach to studies of lived experiences in management studies, as there is a new generation of women whose experiences are not defined by race or gender (and not to say it is not essential). Rather, some women of colour have positive experiences in their organisations, and more literature of this nature needs to be researched as a beacon of how representation can have positive outcomes and act as a catalyst for change.

7.8 Conclusion

Leadership at top management plays an important role in setting the course for the organisation's strategic direction. However, it remains true that women in top management are underrepresented, more so that women of colour remain grossly underrepresented in South African organisations. The following study aimed to answer whether women of colour participate in strategic organisational decision-making. With the limited studies on the going-ons in top management structures in terms of what happens in those processes, the study used two theoretical frameworks to understand why this underrepresentation persists, and what are the potential challenges women of colour face in those roles. In using these theories, the study was able to determine that women of colour are still seen as non-prototypical for leadership roles, which are embedded in institutional systems that have not adjusted to the need for change.

Although the study found that women of colour in top management do indeed participate in strategic management, with the support of their organisation, they still face barriers in the echelons of top management. With the latent structural systems that play a hand in their slow progression, organisations, governments and institutions need to do more to demand for the redress of women in such pivotal parts of society and the economy,

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Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Approval

MR **Masters Research**
Ethical Clearance Approved
[Redacted] Cc: Masters Research Important 11 July 2024 at 11:14 [Details](#)

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

Ethical Clearance Approved



Dear [Redacted]

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.
You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.
We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

[Ethical Clearance Form](#)

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

 **EthicalClearanceReport**
.pdf 

Appendix B: Initial Coding; Atlas TI

2nd round of Initial Coding	Groundedness
● Advocacy	1
○ Authentic to self	1
● Barriers to progress	6
○ Benchmarking	2
● Career	17
● Career risk-taking	6
● Challenges faced_role_org	13
○ Credibility	5
● Decision-making	25
● Decision-making development	3
○ Discrimination	6
● Diversity	41
○ Enforcement of Stereotypes	1
○ Entrepreneurship	1
● Exclusion	1
● Females in leadership_WoC AF AC	31
● Getting Buy-in	5
● Having to prove oneself	7
● Influencing	3
● Intentional diversity at play	14
● Intersectionality	16
● Leadership	21
● Limitations to decision-making	1
● Limited Opportunities	12
● Lived Experience	15
● Lived Experience_Undermined	18
● Microaggression	4
● Organisational diversity	8
○ Other	8
● Participation in decision-making	10
● Policy_Frameworks	11
● Purpose_Motivation	8
● Qualification	5
● Race	4
○ Recommendation	9
● Role Congruency Theory	25
○ Self belief	2
● Self Doubt_Imposter Syndrome	5
● Senior Leadership	2
● Showing Credibility	8
● Skills development	2
● Skills in Role	11
○ Stakeholders	9
● Stereotyping	2
● Strategy development	9
● Strategy Involvement	13
● Support in role	10
● Taking A Chance AC Women	11
● Trust & Credibility	12
● Window dressing	1
● Women developing each other	5

Thematic Coding
● Organisational diversity
● Diversity
● Intentional diversity at play
● Policy_Frameworks

● Career
● Lived Experience
● Lived Experience_Undermined
● Purpose_Motivation
● Qualification
● Having to prove oneself
● Limited Opportunities
● Microaggression
● Showing Credibility
● Challenges faced_role_org
● Intersectionality
● Leadership
● Taking A Chance AC Women
● Trust & Credibility

● Getting Buy-in
● Decision-making
● Decision-making development
● Senior Leadership
● Strategy development
● Strategy Involvement
● Support in role
● Participation in decision-making

● Barriers to progress
○ Discrimination
○ Enforcement of Stereotypes
● Exclusion
● Limitations to decision-making
● Limited Opportunities
● Race
● Self Doubt_Imposter Syndrome
● Stereotyping
● Window dressing
● Role Congruency Theory
○ Self belief

THEMES

EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

GOVERNANCE

CREDIBILITY

MOTIVATION

LIVED EXPERIENCES

LEADERSHIP

INFLUENCING

STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT

BARRIERS

DISCRIMINATION

STEREOTYPING