

**Symbolic violence as an inhibiting factor to women's career advancement
amongst middle and senior managers.**

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Abstract

This study examines how symbolic violence functions as an inhibiting factor in women's career advancement within South Africa's private sector, focusing on middle and senior management. Despite progressive labour legislation and corporate governance frameworks designed to promote equity and inclusion, women, particularly women of colour, remain significantly underrepresented in executive leadership roles.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's framework of capital, habitus, and field, the research explores how structural, cultural, and developmental dynamics interact to reinforce systemic exclusion and maintain organisational hierarchies. A qualitative, interpretivist methodology was employed, incorporating semi-structured interviews with sixteen (16) managers across diverse industries, age groups, and racial backgrounds.

Through narrative thematic analysis, five dominant themes emerged: (1) structural and systemic barriers, (2) social and cultural exclusion, (3) developmental and sponsorship deficits, (4) inhibiting organisational culture and norms, and (5) governance, policy, and accountability gaps. Findings reveal that women often encounter subtle bias, constrained access to influential networks, and implicit pressure to conform to masculine leadership norms. Advancement is frequently determined by social capital and sponsorship rather than capability or performance.

The study contributes to the literature on leadership, diversity, and organisational sociology by contextualising symbolic violence within South Africa's private sector. It offers practical recommendations for corporate leaders, policymakers, and governance bodies to disrupt entrenched power dynamics and cultivate equitable, inclusive leadership pipelines.

Keywords

Symbolic violence; social capital; gender inequality; leadership development; sponsorship.

Plagiarism Declaration

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

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Research Problem

1. Research problem

1.1. Introduction

Leadership diversity and inclusion remain one of the most persistent organisational challenges of the 21st century, despite the existence of comprehensive legislative and policy frameworks designed to redress inequality. In South Africa, the Employment Equity Act (EEA) was established to accelerate transformation and ensure equitable representation across all occupational levels. Yet, research consistently shows that women and other historically marginalised groups remain underrepresented in senior management and executive roles (Chidambaran et al., 2022).

This persistent imbalance reflects more than a compliance deficit, it reveals deep-rooted structural, cultural, and symbolic barriers that continue to shape leadership identities and limit access to power and opportunity (Sims et al., 2019; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). While some Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) perceive diversity as a good business case and therefore advocate for it; some only perceive it from a moral value perspective, social justice and fairness (Ng & Sears, 2020). Recent findings by Chidambaran et al. (2022) demonstrated that women comprise only about 12 percent of top management, which is a testament that organisational transformation remains slow and uneven.

1.2. Research Context

Most South African Private Companies are far from achieving the sector-specific targets mandated by the Employment Equity Act (EEA). The EEA explicitly requires all designated employers to comply with these targets as part of their legal and ethical obligations to advance equitable representation within the workplace (Employment Law Alliance, 2023).

While Fitzsimmons & Callan (2020) confirm that despite decades of awareness and efforts, diversity remains critically underrepresented in senior leadership across global corporations. Scheepers et al. (2018) argues that the key contributing factor to

inadequate transformation is the lack of appropriate sponsorship in senior levels. Similarly, Chidambaran et al. (2022) demonstrate that potential leaders from ethnic minority groups encounter substantial barriers in both leadership advancement opportunities and retention, indicating deep-entrenched systemic challenges in achieving genuine inclusion. Furthermore, Chidambaran et al., (2022) share that women directors exhibit lower turnover rates. Nonetheless, they frequently face substantial barriers to advancing into senior leadership roles, particularly in the absence of a broad and differentiated skill set that aligns with prevailing leadership criteria. Ng & Sears (2020) argues that although CEOs' diversity views are essential, they cannot be implemented without the Human Resource (HR) Management's involvement and buy-in.

A targeted academic investigation was undertaken across six African countries, Malawi, Zambia, Nigeria, Botswana, Ghana, and Kenya, involving 36 women researchers. The findings from this study revealed a pronounced gender imbalance, with men overwhelmingly dominating the research sector within these countries. Furthermore, the study demonstrated the pressures faced by women to adopt masculine traits and behaviours as a strategy for gaining acceptance, maintaining their professional standing, and advancing in their careers (Owusu-Kwarteng et al., 2025).

Chidambaran et al. (2022) further reveal that the representation of women on corporate boards has demonstrated notable progress, with the proportion of female directors rising from 9% in fiscal year 2004 to 19% by 2019. While not detailed in the primary findings, supplementary analysis reveals a decline in the number of firms without any female board members and a significant increase in those with two or more women directors from 12% to 40% over the same period.

Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey (2010) define the rational model of inequality as a process whereby individuals in positions of power actively construct and assign categorical distinctions to others, embedding these classifications with meaning through social interaction. This process legitimises and maintains asymmetrical access to opportunities, allowing dominant groups to accumulate and preserve

advantages at the expense of those in subordinate categories. The privileged construct persuasive narratives to justify their entitlement to valuable resources such as promotions and higher wages.

1.3. Scope and relevance

The central research problem concerns the operation of symbolic violence, as conceptualised by Pierre Bourdieu, referring to the subtle and often invisible exercise of power that legitimises and perpetuates social inequality, within South African corporate environments. This study examines how the interaction between habitus, field, and various forms of capital contributes to the reproduction of exclusionary and hierarchical structures. By unpacking the mechanisms through which subordination is normalised and rendered legitimate, the research aims to advance both theoretical and practical understandings of inequality in the South African organisational contexts.

The study bridges the domains of sociological theory, organisational practice, and leadership development by integrating insights from the sociology of power, the relational model of inequality, and contemporary debates on transformation and employment equity. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper comprehension of how symbolic systems shape the lived realities of professionals within South Africa's private sector.

1.4. Academic reason

This study focuses on exploring how certain groups are marginalised and succumb to subordination and accept it as legitimate or natural. It investigates how capital, habitus and field interact to sustain social stratification. Bourdieu (1990) defines field as networks of social relations, a structured system of positions, within which actors engage in struggles or strategic maneuvers over resources, valued stakes, and opportunities for access. On the other hand, habitus is defined as the “durably inculcated system of structured, structuring dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 52).

As argued by Scheepers et al. (2018) that mentorship and sponsorship are critical determinants of access to top management positions, influencing who advances to senior leadership roles. When implemented strategically, these mechanisms can significantly enhance diversity and inclusion, areas that remain insufficiently realised in many organisations. Conversely, Scheepers et al. (2018) also cautioned that women and racial minorities often encounter compounded barriers in securing sponsorship opportunities, owing to intersecting forms of bias.

This study seeks to examine the lived experiences of the selected participants to determine the extent to which these theoretical perspectives reflect the realities within contemporary business environments, with a particular focus on the South African private sector.

Furthermore, the study provides a clear understanding of how cultural norms, language, and institutional practices reinforce dominance without physical force (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). Contribute to critical theory, sociology of power, and equity-focused leadership research. This is done by exploring the applicability and refinement of leadership development theory and the relational model of inequality. The aim is to examine and enhance their relevance, effectiveness, and practical value in addressing the persistent challenges of gender equity in top management and executive roles. Private Sector alignment to South Africa's Employment Equity Act (EEA) was also examined.

1.5. Business reason

From a business perspective, this paper clarifies the concept of symbolic violence and contribute to the awareness of its manifestations within big corporates. Given that many individuals encounter symbolic violence throughout their careers without consciously recognising it, they are often unable to articulate, challenge, or report such experiences.

By demystifying this subtle yet pervasive form of power and exclusion, the paper seeks to empower individuals, organizations and the authorities such as the Department of Employment and Labour (DoEL) to identify and address it as a critical barrier to

equitable leadership advancement. The focus will be on recognising implicit biases and unwritten cultural rules that exclude diverse talent with an aim of ensuring fair access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making. Promote equitable leadership pipelines to enhance innovation and competitiveness which aligns with corporate governance standards, ESG, and DEI (Diversity, equity, and inclusion).

Luanglath et al. (2019) emphasises that the Top Management Team (TMT) represents the most influential decision-making group within an organization, responsible for formulating its strategic direction. These scholars further elaborate that a diverse TMT is a competitive advantage delivering enhanced innovation, broader skillset, improved problem-solving capabilities, increased creativity, and deeper market insights. For instance, female leaders often have more precise insights and heightened sensitivity toward the preferences and needs of female customers, attributes that may be less pronounced among male leaders. This demonstrates that lack of gender and cultural diversity within leadership may result in a weakened understanding of heterogeneous customer bases, particularly in markets where consumer preferences are influenced by diverse social and demographic factors.

1.6. Research Aim

Although the phenomenon of symbolic violence has been extensively examined in global contexts, its manifestation within the South African private sector remains underexplored. This study therefore seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of how symbolic violence operates in this specific context, particularly in relation to leadership advancement, organisational culture, and inclusion practices.

To address this overarching aim, the study is guided by the following research questions, which have been derived from the existing body of literature discussed in Chapter 2:

Research Question 1: How does symbolic violence constrain women's progression into senior management and executive positions within large organisations?

Research Question 2: In what ways do interpersonal relationships and professional competencies interact to shape access to top management roles, and which of these factors is perceived to exert greater influence?

Research Question 3: How does the absence of sponsorship mechanisms impede diversity and inclusion efforts in executive leadership?

By addressing these questions, the research seeks to generate contextually grounded, actionable, and equitable recommendations for organisations, policymakers, and business leaders. The ultimate objective is to challenge and transform entrenched power dynamics, thereby fostering more inclusive, transparent, and socially just organisational cultures within South Africa's corporate sector.

1.7. Conclusion

Chapter 1 has positioned the study within the broader discourse on diversity, equity, and inclusion, underscoring the paradox between legislative intent and organisational practice. Furthermore, insights from Luanglath et al. (2019) highlight the strategic and economic advantages associated with diverse leadership teams, reinforcing the imperative for inclusivity at the highest organisational levels.

While existing policies promote transformation, entrenched social and cultural hierarchies continue to reproduce leadership inequality. The chapter established symbolic violence as a critical analytical lens for understanding how exclusion persists even in ostensibly progressive corporate environments. It also clarified the academic rationale, extending Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital to the study of leadership and the business rationale, which links equitable leadership pipelines to innovation, competitiveness, and sustainable governance.

This section establishes the foundation for Chapter 2, which provides a systematic review of relevant literature, including theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and scholarly debates on leadership development, inequality, and symbolic domination.

Chapter 3 then refines and contextualises the research questions in relation to the theoretical perspectives outlined in the preceding chapters.

Chapter 4 details the research methodology, encompassing the research design, philosophical stance, sampling strategy, unit of analysis, measurement instruments, data collection and analysis procedures, quality assurance measures, and study limitations.

The findings, presented in Chapter 5, are organised into key themes and subthemes derived from participant data. Chapter 6 discusses these findings in light of the existing literature, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the study by synthesising the main insights, outlining their theoretical and practical implications, and proposing recommendations for future research and practice.

Together, these insights inform a deeper understanding of how diversity and inclusion can be re-imagined beyond compliance toward structural and cultural transformation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 provides a critical synthesis of the theoretical and empirical literature underpinning this study. It explores how leadership development theories intersect with sociological perspectives on power and inequality to explain the persistent underrepresentation of women and other marginalised groups in senior management. Central to this discussion is the integration of Pierre Bourdieu's Bourdieusian framework, comprising the interrelated concepts of field, habitus, and capital, with contemporary leadership development theory (Day et al., 2021; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). This combined lens enables a nuanced understanding of how individual trajectories are shaped by structural forces, cultural norms, and institutionalised privilege.

The chapter begins by outlining key theoretical constructs that frame leadership identity and development, contrasting traditional leader-centric approaches with more relational, context-sensitive models. It then examines the systemic biases and social mechanisms that hinder women's progression, including sponsorship inequities, tokenism, and the gendered expectations embedded in workplace norms (Ely et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2019). Subsequently, it introduces symbolic violence as an interpretive framework for analysing the invisible processes through which subordination becomes normalised and accepted. Finally, the chapter situates these discussions within the South African context. It interrogates the intersection of race, gender, and class in shaping organisational hierarchies and diversity management practices (Nkomo, 2021; Holvino, 2010; Carrim et al., 2024).

By weaving together leadership theory, critical sociology, and diversity scholarship, this literature review provides both conceptual depth and contextual relevance. It positions symbolic violence not merely as a theoretical abstraction but as a lived organisational reality that constrains inclusive leadership and perpetuates inequality.

2.2. Theoretical constructs:

The Leadership development theory suggested that the way individuals, women in this study, became leaders and the factors that made them effective in leadership roles were not always the same. This indicated that the processes underlying the rise to leadership positions were not necessarily the same as those that determined successful leadership performance (Day et al., 2021).

According to Ely et al. (2011), women leaders were often subjected to a leadership identity validation process. This process was not only based on the leader's point of view but also highly dependent upon the recognition and endorsement from others. Therefore, the identity was strengthened and boosted self-confidence when it was recognised and affirmed by others. Additionally, this process was deeply influenced by prevailing social and cultural norms, which often aligned leadership legitimacy with traditionally masculine traits, thereby shaped how women's leadership were perceived and accepted within organizational contexts.

The above approach poses a dilemma and may cause leaders to lose their authentic self as Ely et al. (2011) further argues that the formation of a leader's identity was intrinsically connected to the leader's sense of purpose. Therefore, excessive reliance on external validation led to a misalignment between the leader's actions and their core values. This potentially resulted in a deviation from, or erosion of, their authentic leadership purpose.

Sociologylearners (2024) defined Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory as a fundamental analytical framework that examined power relations and the dynamics of social interaction. Bourdieu conceptualised it as a structured social space or an arena of contestation where individuals and groups engaged in struggles over access to resources, legitimacy, and influence. These fields were governed by context-specific norms, rules, and power hierarchies that shaped individuals' behaviour and status. Each field operated with its own forms of valued capital: economic, cultural, social, or symbolic which determined an individual's position and access to advancements

within the field. Central to Field Theory were the interrelated constructs of habitus (embodied dispositions), capital (resources and assets), power, and symbolic struggles, all of which collectively illuminated the mechanisms through which social order was reproduced or contested.

2.3. Leader vs leadership development:

Leader development invested in one individual and its effectiveness was often questioned. The selection process used multi-rater assessments of integrity; screening for maladaptive personality traits had been adopted. The aim was to cultivate leaders who embodied virtuous, ethical, and socially responsible behaviours that promoted positive and principled leadership (Day et al., 2021).

Leadership development focused on developing a group of people in an organisation which enabled broader participation of team members rather than one individual. This approach enhanced effective and shared leadership, fostering distributed responsibilities, collaboration and optimal organisational adaptability. (Day et al., 2021).

Ely et al. (2011) focused on the Women's Leadership Development Programs (WLPs), a framework that fostered a psychologically safe space to explore identity through storytelling and peer learning. WLPs framework also actively addressed gender biases by fostering environments that not only acknowledge but also affirm women's values and collective aspirations. This intentional cultivation of purpose-driven leadership enhanced authenticity. It further served as a strategic countermeasure to dominant gender stereotypes, thereby enabled more equitable and inclusive leadership development.

2.4. Workplace norms in contrast to ideal development practices:

Leadership development could be conceptualised as a continuous, context-sensitive process rather than a series of isolated, standardised interventions, such as generic leadership workshops or periodic 360-degree feedback sessions. Effective leadership development required a strategically integrated approach that supported the holistic

and ongoing transformation of an individual through his/her everyday experiences and organizational interactions (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). Drawing parallels to the principles of gender mainstreaming by Lee-Gosselin et al. (2013), each developmental touchpoint, be it a job assignment, performance review, or networking opportunity would have been critically evaluated in terms of its potential to generate valuable forms of capital for the individual.

This evaluation would account for the individual's habitus and the structural constraints within the organisational field that may have had historically limited, or continued to limit, access to such capital. A developmental strategy grounded in this relational understanding fostered more equitable and sustainable leadership outcomes (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). In contrast to these ideal practices, women leaders are sent to the traditional leadership trainings which ignore the gender bias or treat it as a deficit in women (Ely et al., 2011).

Mayer et al. (2019) argued that some white people viewed black people as unskilled, therefore appointed them in leadership positions as tokenism for EEA compliance. In addition, these scholars, Mayer et al. (2019) demonstrated that most of the appointed candidates were qualified and competent individuals. While black female professionals were frustrated by being labelled as unskilled and seen as tokenism, their black male counterparts saw this as an opportunity to prove their competences.

2.5. Inequality and systemic biases:

Day et al. (2021) share that people who are good-looking, taller and males are perceived and often emerge as good leaders, this perception is already disadvantaging women. Additionally, Day et al. (2021) further state that gaining a comprehensive understanding of how individuals evolve and mature as leaders is essential to the progression and theoretical advancement of leader development in the 21st century. Issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion must be directory addressed. Sims et al. (2019) also reveal that a significant underrepresentation of individuals from marginalised social identities, such as women, persists in senior leadership roles due to structural inequities in access to power and opportunity.

Scheepers et al. (2018) argues that one of the key barriers of leadership advancements and diversity and inclusion in top management is the lack of appropriate sponsorship in middle, senior and top management. These scholars define sponsorship as someone already in power that actively advocates for protégés to be promoted. They further argue that this approach may cause an unwanted homophily effect, because sponsors often choose protégés with the same demographics, background and values. The underrepresented groups such as women are unfortunately often blocked from accessing such sponsorship, this is often done by excluding them from informal networks, impose stereotypes and biases about competence and cultural or organisational “fit”.

Traditional leader development programs often assume a skills deficit among underrepresented groups, but identity-conscious programs, particularly those tailored to women, recognise the impact of systemic biases. These programs focus on leadership identity development, raise awareness of subtle forms of discrimination, and promote psychological safety (Ely et al., 2011). By supporting both skill-building and identity formation, such frameworks enable marginalized leaders to strengthen their networks and advance more effectively, contributing to a more inclusive leadership landscape (Day et al., 2021).

2.6. Challenges in Identity-Conscious Leadership Development

While identity-conscious leadership development frameworks offer important benefits for fostering diversity and inclusion, they also present challenges (Day et al., 2021). A key critique is the implicit assumption that marginalised individuals such as women, require special intervention, which risks reinforcing benevolent sexism or racism by portraying such individuals as deficient or in need of remediation (Cundiff et al., 2018).

In contrast, Cundiff et al. (2018) advocate for identity-blind, all-inclusive leadership development approaches, which aim to engage all groups without singling out marginalised identities. Although these approaches may reduce stigma, they are insufficient alone to address the systemic inequalities embedded within leadership structures.

2.7. Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence is a phenomenon that was introduced by a prominent French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, back in the 1990s. It serves as a critical lens through which to understand the subtle and often invisible mechanisms of domination that perpetuate social inequality within cultural and institutional structures. Bourdieu (1998) defined it as a pivotal mechanism within Bourdieu's relational framework. It posits that individuals who are denied psychological safety and personal agency become constrained in their ability to advance personally or professionally. This manifests when individuals internalise systemic domination and perceive it as legitimate or natural. Victims may unknowingly accept their marginalisation as a reflection of the 'natural order' or as an implicit expectation to 'know one's place', often without conscious recognition or resistance. This process sustains existing hierarchies by securing the complicity of those it subordinates.

Bourdieu (2001) enhanced the definition of symbolic violence as a subtle and often invisible exercise of power through the imposition of dominant norms, values, and expectations. It operates as a mechanism by which access to valuable forms of capital such as social, cultural, and symbolic capital is systematically restricted or denied to certain individuals and groups. This form of power is a silent detractor that perpetuates inequality by reinforcing existing hierarchies, often without obvious oppression, making it particularly insidious and difficult to confront.

Due to its covert and insidious nature, symbolic violence often results in intense psychological distress that causes mental health challenges such as depression, fatigue and illness, which may surpass the impact of physical abuse. Its invisibility complicates recognition, intervention, and healing, resulting in long-term effects particularly detrimental (Morgan & Björkert, 2006).

2.8. The Bourdieusian framework

Bourdieu (1990) developed the Bourdieusian framework, illustrated in Figure 1 below, which is a relational perspective on leadership development that examines how the individual's progression is shaped across three interrelated levels: micro (capital), meso (habitus), and macro (field). This framework emphasises that leadership development is not a neutral or merit-based trajectory but is deeply influenced by social structures and inherited advantages.

Bourdieu (2020) defines the different levels as follows:

Micro Level: At the micro level, individuals accumulate various forms of capital: cultural, economic, social, and symbolic that hold differing value depending on the field in which they operate.

Meso Level: At the meso level, an individual's habitus, ingrained dispositions shaped by past experiences and socio-economic background influences how they navigate opportunities.

Macro Level: At the macro level, fields: structured social spaces such as industries or organizations define what capital is valued and who controls access to advancement.

Due to the nature of this study, focusing in the business context, the macro level will be examined.

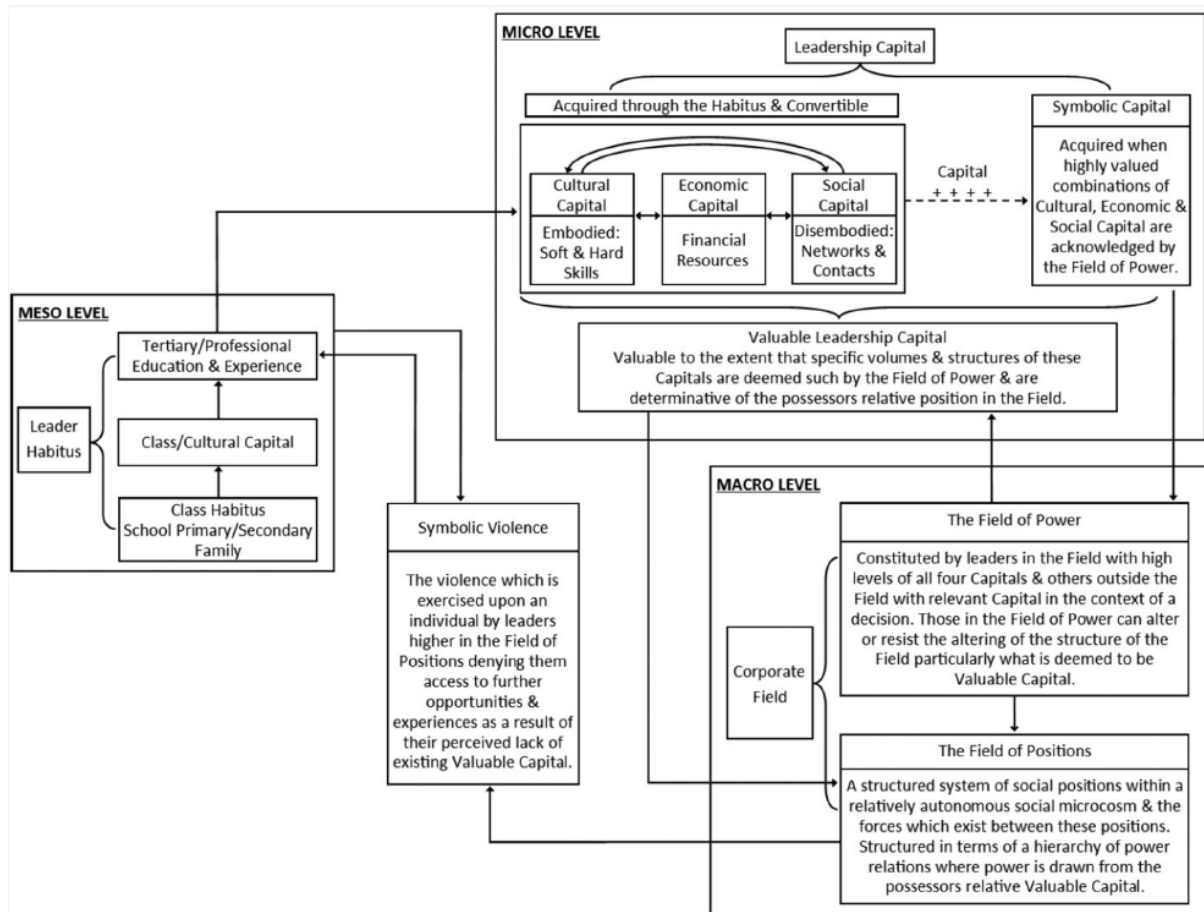


Figure 1

The Bourdieusian framework. (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020).

Note. Relational perspective on leadership development that examines how the individual's progression is shaped across three interrelated levels (macro, meso and micro).

2.9. Systematic exclusion:

Scheepers et al. (2018) disclose that women and other racial minorities often face lack of sponsorship due to intersecting biases, which perpetuates compounded barriers to entering and advancing into top executive roles. This dynamic reinforces homophily effects because sponsors frequently advocate for protégés who share similar social identities. Similarly, the framework in Figure one above reveals how individuals from demographically diverse or marginalised groups are systematically excluded from acquiring valuable capital early in life. This exclusion leads to perceptions, by those dominant in the field, of a lack of leadership potential, thereby further restricting access

to future leadership development opportunities. Over time, marginalisation is reinforced and inherited, perpetuating leadership inequality across generations (Bourdieu, 1990).

This relational model provides deeper insight into why executive leadership remains demographically homogeneous and offers significant implications for leadership development theory and practice. By recognising how power, privilege, and access to capital shape leadership trajectories, the Bourdieusian lens enables more targeted interventions to disrupt cycles of exclusion and advance inclusive leadership development (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020).

2.10. Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity is not merely about the presence or visibility of different genders, races, ages, career experience and ethnicity on the table. It needs to be taken further to giving everyone a chance to influence key decisions and critical functions, which is the inclusion aspect. The retention of diverse Directors and progression to higher roles are the two vital metrics of inclusion (Chidambaran et al., 2022).

Ely et al. (2011) revealed that effective leadership is associated with the traditional norms that privilege traits such as assertiveness and dominance. In contrast, women are perceived as nurturing, collaborative, and selfless; therefore, systematically devalued within these traits, leading to their disproportionate exclusion from leadership recognition and advancements.

Several authors argued that race should feature strongly in the analysis of diversity management. One of these authors is Nkomo (2021) who began by arguing that “dethroning the ‘emperor’ was still a challenge” (p. 213). In this usage, “dethroning the emperor” referred to the universal power of Western knowledge and the hegemonic positioning of everything western and white. She then linked this challenge to what she called the fact that race occupies a marginal space in management and organisations, which she tells lies at the root of making change a very slow process.

Nkomo (2021) essentially argued for the use of race as a core analytical tool in the discourse of diversity in management and organisational context. Her argument around race featuring more, was echoed by other scholars such as Holvino (2010), who also argued for the centrality of race in discussing identity and broader diversity. “Critical race theory is a way of thinking about race and racism which challenges the way in which race and racial power are constructed and represented” (Carrim et al., 2024, p.66).

Holvino (2010) broadened the argument and talked about the need for diversity that is premised on intersectionality. In her study, she argued for the reconceptualisation of the intersections of race, gender and class, as simultaneous processes of identity, institutional and social practice used for redress. This route was taken because the work on intersection of race, gender and class is underdeveloped; with little evidence that this was even recognised in management and organisations.

Holvino (2010) further argued that “perspectives that analyse race, gender, ethnicity, class, nationality and sexuality as simultaneous processes of identity, institutional and social practice, brings more complete and accurate analyses, and better organizational and policy change applications” (p.48).

The literature on diversity management, included inputs by Carrim et al. (2024) who argued that part of the challenge in South Africa was that as much as race, gender, diversity was much spoken about, there was no shared meaning as to what these meant. He then stated that lack of this clarity has implications for the workplace as it then becomes difficult to facilitate to needed transformation, “we cannot be clear on how to do this” (Carrim et al., 2024, p.63)

Chidambaran et al. (2022) demonstrated an interesting and broader shifts in board composition and tenure dynamics by revealing that the average age of directors had shown an upward trend, increasing from approximately 59 to 63 years.

While existing literature broadly addressed challenges related to diversity and inclusion, this study specifically focused on the South African private sector. It aimed to critically examine how symbolic violence functions as a structural barrier that impedes women's advancement to top management and executive positions in large organisations which hindered efforts to achieve meaningful diversity and inclusion at senior leadership levels.

2.11 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter revealed that leadership inequality is sustained by both structural and symbolic forces. Traditional leadership development models focused narrowly on skill acquisition, often overlook how systemic bias, cultural assumptions, and power relations shape access to leadership opportunities. In contrast, identity-conscious and contextually grounded frameworks highlighted the necessity of addressing these underlying dynamics to achieve authentic inclusion. The Bourdieusian framework offers a powerful tool for understanding how social positions, dispositions, and institutional rules interact to reproduce or challenge hierarchical order.

The chapter concludes that achieving meaningful diversity requires a paradigm shift from compliance-driven diversity programs toward transformative, equity-centred leadership development. Such transformation demands recognition of symbolic violence as a hidden mechanism of exclusion and a deliberate effort to restructure organisational cultures, redefine leadership prototypes, and redistribute access to social, cultural, and symbolic capital. These insights lay the conceptual groundwork for the subsequent methodological and analytical chapters, where the theoretical principles discussed here are applied to empirical data within the South African private sector.

Chapter 3: Research question

3.1 Introduction

Building upon the theoretical and empirical foundations established in Chapter 2, this chapter articulates the research questions that guide the study. Chapter 2 highlighted that leadership inequality is sustained through both structural and symbolic mechanisms, including limited sponsorship, exclusionary social networks, and entrenched cultural norms. These dynamics are reinforced through symbolic violence, a form of subtle, invisible domination that normalises subordination and restricts access to valuable social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1998; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020).

In alignment with these insights, the present chapter focuses on examining how symbolic violence manifests within leadership development processes and how it constrains women's progression to top management and executive roles in the South African private sector. The chapter is grounded in the relational model of inequality and the Bourdieusian framework of field, capital, and habitus. These interrelated constructs provide a lens through which to analyse how social positioning, institutional practices, and power relations interact to determine who is deemed "fit" for advancement.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to critically examine the ways in which existing leadership development paradigms either reproduce or challenge these inequalities. It aims to uncover the relational mechanisms that legitimise exclusion and to identify opportunities for more inclusive leadership pipelines. In doing so, the study contributes both to theoretical advancement in leadership and to practical interventions that support diversity, equity, and inclusion in compliance with South Africa's constitutional and legislative mandates.

Consequently, this chapter outlines the key research questions that emerged from the preceding literature review and theoretical framework. These questions seek to explore:

- (1) how symbolic violence inhibits women's advancement to top management,
- (2) how relationships and skills interact to shape leadership access, and
- (3) how sponsorship or the lack thereof affects diversity and inclusion outcomes in executive leadership.

The researcher employed the theoretical perspectives presented in Chapters One and Two to develop the research questions. These questions are intended to guide an exploration of the extent to which the lived experiences of the selected participants in large corporations correspond with established theoretical perspectives, with a particular focus on the South African private sector context.

3.2. Research Questions

Research Question 1: How does symbolic violence inhibit women from advancing to Top Management or Executive roles in large organisations to improve diversity and inclusion?

This is an open-ended question that seeks to assess if the participants' lived experiences and/or observations are aligned to any of the following researchers' perspectives: Fitzsimmons & Callan (2020), Ely et al. (2011), Day et al. (2021), Mayer et al. (2019), Cundiff et al. (2018). These scholars highlight key barriers or challenges such as conformity to masculine practices, psychological safety deficit, gender biases, subtle forms of discrimination, structural, systematic and social exclusion, and many more. The researcher of this study has also observed and experienced several unfair labour practices across the management levels. These challenge and unfair practices will be explored in the South African context in this paper.

Research Question 2: How do relationships and skills interact to shape access to top management, and which is perceived to hold greater influence?

There are strong perceptions regarding the power of relationships and how they induce advancements to top management (Scheepers et al., 2018). This research

question seeks to investigate and understand if the participants have observed or experienced this.

Research Question 3: How does lack of sponsorship hinder diversity and inclusion in top management?

Scheepers et al. (2018) argues that sponsorship and mentorship are the key catalysts of diversity and inclusion in senior and top management roles. These scholars define sponsorship as leaders that are already in power who actively advocate for proteges to be visible and promoted to senior roles, while mentorship focuses on guiding, advising and providing psychosocial support directory to the proteges.

Scheepers et al. (2018) caution that, although sponsorship is a critical enabler of career advancement, it may inadvertently reinforce barriers to women's progression into executive leadership. This occurs through homophily, as sponsors often advocate for protégés who share similar social identities.

Similarly, Scheepers and Mahlangu (2022) highlight a dilemma arising from the limited availability of female mentors, which has resulted in men assuming these roles. They argue that such dynamics may yield adverse consequences, as male mentorship is frequently shaped by historical and prevailing patriarchal leadership styles, which can contribute to diminished confidence among women leaders.

Furthermore, exclusionary social networks, such as those cultivated in male-dominated spaces like golf clubs, are perceived to perpetuate inequities by limiting women's access to influential circles. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine the validity of these perceptions and theories through engagement with a diverse group of leaders.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the central research questions that frame the inquiry into leadership development, symbolic violence, and diversity within South Africa's private sector. These questions were derived directly from the theoretical foundations discussed in Chapter 2, particularly the Bourdieusian relational framework and the relational model of inequality. Together, they guide the empirical exploration of how systemic power dynamics and cultural practices influence leadership advancement.

By delineating these research questions, the study positions itself to investigate how symbolic and structural barriers operate in organisational contexts and how they can be mitigated through more equitable leadership development practices.

The next chapter, Chapter 4, details the research design and methodology employed to address these questions. It explains how data were collected, analysed, and interpreted to generate meaningful insights that contribute to both scholarly understanding and practical transformation in leadership diversity and inclusion.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1. Introduction

Building upon the research questions articulated in Chapter 3, this chapter outlines the methodological framework that guided the empirical phase of the study. While the preceding chapters provided a theoretical and conceptual foundation for understanding how symbolic violence and relational inequality manifest within leadership structures, this chapter translates those insights into a practical research design. It details the strategies, philosophical assumptions, and analytical techniques employed to investigate the lived experiences of leaders within South Africa's private sector.

The purpose of this methodological framework is to ensure that the study's approach aligns with its interpretive and exploratory nature. Given that the research seeks to understand *how* and *why* symbolic violence operates within organisational contexts, an interpretivist philosophy was adopted. This paradigm recognises that social reality is constructed through interaction and meaning making, which aligns closely with Bourdieu's relational perspective on power, habitus, and field. By using a qualitative, inductive design, the study sought to capture the subjective meanings and nuanced experiences of individuals navigating leadership hierarchies, particularly women and other marginalised groups.

A narrative research strategy was therefore selected to enable participants to share their lived experiences through reflective storytelling. These narratives were analysed thematically using Atlas.ti software to identify patterns, contradictions, and power dynamics embedded in their accounts. The methodology also incorporated rigorous quality control measures to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

The design of this study is both descriptive and explanatory. It describes how symbolic violence manifests in corporate settings and explains why such dynamics persist despite diversity and inclusion interventions. This approach ensures direct alignment

with the three research questions introduced in Chapter 3, focusing on the barriers to women's advancement, the interaction between relationships and skills, and the influence of sponsorship in executive development.

Overall, this chapter provides a transparent account of the methodological decisions underpinning the research. It discusses the research philosophy, approach to theory development, strategy, sampling techniques, data collection methods, and analytical processes. By grounding these choices in both theory and scholarly precedent, the methodology ensures that the empirical analysis presented in Chapter 5 is both credible and contextually meaningful.

4.1. Purpose of research design

The purpose of this research design was descriptive and explanatory. According to DrJ Thesising 101 (2020), descriptive focused on the how aspects of a phenomenon, while explanatory focused on the why. The collection of data was measurable in a descriptive study, it required an accurate in-depth analysis and explanation of a phenomenon (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

The different elements of symbolic violence and leadership development were explored, this study examined the how and why it played out in multiple sectors/companies' management teams.

The aim was to ensure awareness, empower, minimise and mitigate the silent killer of effective diversity and inclusion in top management. This covered both the descriptive and explanatory aspects of the phenomenon.

4.2. Research Design

4.2.1. Philosophy

Interpretivism philosophy was used in this study due to its social construct nature.

Definition of interpretivism:

Saunders & Lewis (2018) defined interpretivism as a concept that “relates to the study of social phenomena in their natural environment.” (p. 109). Throughout this research there was a desire to gain a comprehensive understanding of dynamics within a work organisation. These necessitated engagements involving the individuals who operated within it, often referred to as “social actors”. The use of the term ‘social actors’ drew on a theatrical metaphor that implied that individuals actively performed roles, constructed meaning, and influenced organisational processes through their interactions (Saunders & Lewis (2018)).

The Nature and goal:

Goldkuhl (2012) confirmed that interpretivism philosophy was one of the dominant approaches associated with a qualitative methodology where socially constructed interests were examined. Naturalistic data collection methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observations were used with an aim to uncover the multifaceted nature of the social issue under investigation (Business Research methodology, n.d.). This approach was inherently interactive, collaborative, and participatory, which emphasised contextual specificity and the exploration of unique or atypical cases. It sought to generate rich, meaningful insights into individuals’ perceptions, the challenges they encountered and the strategies they employed in response, yielding depth in our understanding of complex social realities (Business Research methodology, n.d.).

4.2.2. Approach to theory development

Due to the chosen philosophy, interpretivism, which relied on gaining a comprehensive understanding of practical socially constructed problems and observations as highlighted in section 4.2 above, the inductive approach was used (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

Inductive approach began with detailed observations and progressed toward the development of broader generalisations and theoretical insights. It was often characterised as a “bottom-up” process, where the researcher constructed abstract concepts or theoretical frameworks from the systematic analysis of observed phenomena. In this inductive approach, the researcher typically initiated the study with a general area of interest.

While inductive reasoning emphasised theory-building from observed evidence, it did not prohibit the use of existing theoretical frameworks to inform the formulation of research questions or objectives. Through this process, the researcher extended the theoretical insights that were firmly rooted in observed realities as depicted in figure 2 below (Business Research methodology, n.d.).

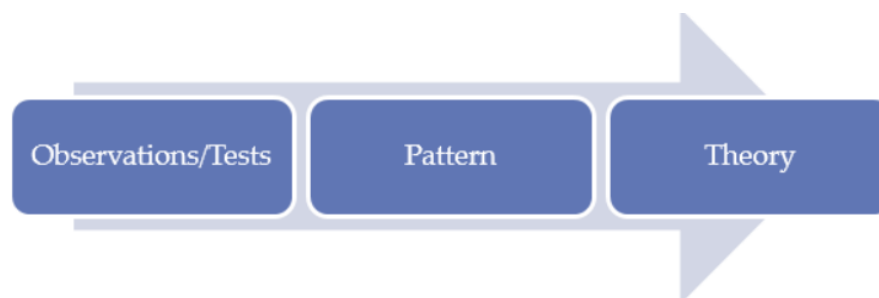


Figure 2

Inductive approach. (Business Research methodology, n.d.).

Note. The process of inductive approach

Saunders & Lewis (2018) further explained that in the inductive approach the researchers sought to develop an understanding of the subtle and complex subjective meanings that individuals ascribed to events and experiences.

4.2.3. Research Strategy

The narrative research strategy was used in this research to gather the narratives of the participants. (narrative thematic analysis) The researcher's contacts and network from middle to senior management were contacted to participate in the study. Some of the identified participants further recommended additional participants in their circle/network. Interviews were used to collect data.

An interview is a research strategy that involved well-structured collection of data from a smaller population typically gathered through organised methods such structured or semi-structured questions (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Some of the targeted participants were unavailable for scheduled interviews, whether conducted virtually or in person.

Consequently, the researcher adopted a flexible data collection approach by emailing the research questions to these participants. To mitigate the potential limitation of obtaining less detailed responses through email correspondence, the researcher conducted follow-up telephone calls to solicit more detailed and elaborated answers.

4.2.4. Time horizon

Cross-sectional time horizon was used which was a real-time representation (snapshot) of this study seeing that it can be effectively conducted at a particular point to gauge the latest progress at that given moment. The decision to use cross-sectional time horizon was also inspired by the previous similar studies that used the same time horizon and due to the limited time that was available to complete this study.

4.2.5. Methodological choices

The qualitative methodology was used to collect the data in this study. Many scholars such as Ahikire & Akihire (2022), Cohen et al. (2023) and Owusu-Kwarteng et al. (2025) strongly advocate for qualitative methodology in social-orientated and transformational studies. These scholars have demonstrated that this methodology is the best in allowing the experiences and narratives of participants, women in particular, to be excavated authentically.

4.3. Population

The population for this study was the different private sectors and large corporates operating in South Africa. The full population of private companies had not been confirmed.

4.5. Sampling method and size

The two categories of sampling methods (probability and non-probability) as defined by Hassan (2024) were considered. Non-probability sampling was adopted since the full list of the South African private companies had not been confirmed; therefore, random sampling was not possible, and the probability or chance of each member being selected was also unknown (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

A sample was taken from different private sectors and large corporates in South Africa, focused on women from middle to senior management. Women that had made it to top management were also interviewed to gain insights on how they navigated through or observed symbolic violence on their way up. Additionally, several men in middle and senior management were also interviewed for further insights from male perspective. The sample size was between 15 and 22.

4.4. Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis was individuals, middle management and leaders of the selected companies.

4.6. Measurement Instrument

The key themes emerging from the literature review were systematically identified and integrated into the semi-structured interview guide used during data collection, in alignment with the first step of McCracken's (1988) enquiry methodology, which emphasises the analytical dimension of the research process.

Complementing this, the researcher went beyond the literature by incorporating questions that tapped into the cultural dimension, informed by the researcher's own experiential insights that were insufficiently addressed in the existing literature. This reflexive approach is central to the second step of McCracken's (1988) methodology, where the researcher becomes an active instrument of enquiry. It creates a unique analytical advantage, adds depth and perspective that existing scholarship alone cannot provide.

To ensure richness of data, both the analytical and cultural questions were deliberately open-ended and supported by focused prompts. These encouraged participants to share detailed reflections that resonated with the central themes of the study (McCracken, 1988). In several instances, the critical incident technique was employed, compelling participants to recall and analyse significant lived or observed experiences, an approach that McCracken (1988) strongly advocates. The summary of the interview questions with their related themes, research questions and literature are depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Interview questions

Research questions	Supporting literature	Interview questions
How does symbolic violence inhibit women from advancing to Top Management or Executive roles in large organisations to improve diversity and inclusion	Owusu-Kwarteng et al. (2025). Ely et al. (2011) Ng & Sears (2020) Chidambaran et al. (2022) Bourdieu (1990)	Have you ever been overlooked or denied access to development opportunities, funding, social gathering or special projects? Please elaborate. Have you ever shared different views and felt that it was misinterpreted or distorted and resulted in limiting your career progression? Please elaborate Have you ever felt overlooked or observed females being overlooked for a promotion due to your/their perceived lack of valuable social capital/networks? Please elaborate. How are women leaders evaluated in comparison to their male counterparts? How crucial is fitting in in top Management and to what extent do female leaders adopt the male leadership behaviours and norms? Have you ever felt pressured to adopt a leadership style that does not align with your authentic self in order to be accepted or promoted? Are the organisational efforts to promote women into leadership roles genuine and effective?

How do relationships and skills interact to shape access to top management, and which is perceived to hold greater influence	Owusu-Kwarteng et al. (2025). Day et al. (2021) Scheepers et al. (2018) Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey (2010) Bourdieu (1990)	Do you think relationships are more important than skills for Top Management advancements and why? Have you ever felt overlooked or observed females being overlooked for a promotion due to your/their perceived lack of valuable social capital/networks? Please elaborate To what extent does fitting in means adopting behaviours associated with male leadership norms
How does lack of sponsorship hinder diversity and inclusion in top management?	Scheepers et al. (2018)	Are there informal networks or "old boys' clubs" that influence promotions or opportunities in your organisation?

Note. Research questions with their guiding literature and related interview questions.

4.7. Data collection / gathering process

The following data collection techniques were used to collect the data: commenced with semi-structured interviews and structured observations, then used the participants' insights to inform the development of a subsequent questions, which was implemented in a relatively straightforward and seamless manner. This was ideal within a limited time frame, to facilitate the integration of qualitative depth (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). During this stage, there were in-depth thoughts to assess if scales could be used for grouping similar questions which could make the analysis more accurate and easier (Samuels, 2020).

The primary platform that was initially planned for the semi-structured interviews was face-to-face, to maximise trust and correct interpretation of the participants' responses (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). However, face-to-face was not practical for some of the participants due to their different locations and clashing commitments. Microsoft Teams was used to bridge the distance gap and timing challenges.

Furthermore, some of the participants availability was a complicated challenge, they therefore requested for the interview questionnaires to be emailed to them. This hybrid approach allowed all the appropriate participants to complete the questions comprehensively and in depth at their earliest convenience. It was essential to invoke this approach to accommodate both the diversity and availability of the targeted participants. The initial target was middle to top management women, but after deeper reflections on the topic, there was a revelation that male perspectives are also essential and therefore a few male leaders were included. All interviews were conducted within a duration of approximately 45 minutes.

Prior to the commencement of data collection, selected professional networks were informally engaged to create awareness and support higher participation rates during the interview phase.

A pilot interview was undertaken with a trusted contact from the researcher's network to assess the clarity, timing, and effectiveness of the interview schedule. Based on the insights gained, minor refinements were made to enhance the structure and flow of the interview questions.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and individuals were free to withdraw at any stage without facing any consequences. To maintain confidentiality and protect participant anonymity, no names or company affiliations were disclosed. All data collected were reported in an aggregated and anonymised format, without any personally identifiable information.

The collected data has been securely stored on a password-protected external hard drive and a personal encrypted OneDrive account. In accordance with ethical research guidelines, the data will be retained for a minimum period of ten years to ensure accessibility for future reference, audits, or further scholarly inquiry.

4.8. Data Analysis approach

Atlas.ti software was used to analyse the data using narrative thematic analysis approach to identify and interpret the common themes and patterns in the participants' responses. This software was chosen because it was recommended and used by other scholars who conducted similar studies. The participants' responses were transcribed, cleaned and prepared for loading into Atlas.ti. All the cleaned transcripts were then loaded into Atlas.ti for analysis.

4.8.1. Coding

The researcher went through the loaded scripts and followed the three-stage coding process, i. open coding, ii. axial coding and iii. selective coding. Coding is the processes of identifying the different phrases that were used by the participants to answer the questions in the data and giving them labels. There were 254 codes identified, depicted in Appendix 2, some of them were duplicated and therefore reduced after removing all the duplicates.

4.8.2. Categories and Themes

Similar codes were grouped together into different categories, thereafter different themes emerged after analysing and grouping together of the categories that had similar meanings. This process is visually depicted in Figure 3. The examples of these themes are Structural & Systemic Barriers, Social & Cultural Barriers, Developmental

& Leadership Barriers, Organisational Culture & Norms, Governance, Policy & Accountability, detailed in appendix 1.

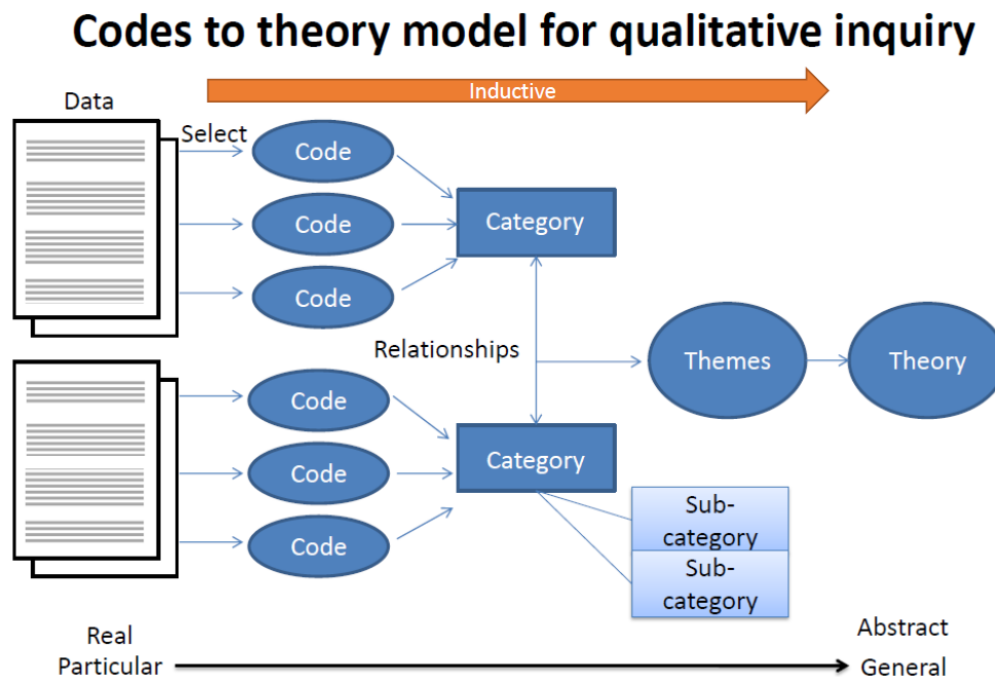


Figure 3

Codes to theory model for qualitative inquiry. Chipp, K. (2025)

Note. This figure shows the process that was followed to code the data, categorise similar codes and subsequently derived to themes presented in Appendix 1.

4.9. Data Quality control

To ensure quality control in this qualitative research, the application of four essential pillars was essential: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Each of which played a critical role in maintaining methodological rigor. The integration of all four pillars was imperative for producing robust, credible, and high-quality research outcomes (Healthcare Humanized, 2024).

4.9.1 Credibility

The first one was credibility, which evaluated the extent to which the researcher's representation accurately reflected the constructed realities of the participants. There were instances where the responses were not so clear, and the researcher politely requested the participants to elaborate a bit further to ensure clarity, validity and

credibility of the responses. Specific prompts were also used to probe for deeper insights.

4.9.2 Transferability

The second one was transferability, examined whether the findings were meaningful and applicable across different contexts or settings. The context of this study has been clearly defined in chapter one and the participants were carefully selected using a well-defined selection criterion highlighted in section 4.2 and 4.5.

4.9.3 Dependability

The third one was dependability which assessed the consistency, coherence, and logical integrity of the research process and outcomes over time. There were instances where the responses were not so clear and the researcher politely requested the participants to elaborate a bit further to ensure clarity and validity of the responses. Specific prompts were also used to probe for deeper insights and ensure dependability.

4.9.4 Confirmability

The fourth and last one was confirmability which ensured that the interpretations and conclusions were grounded in the participants' experiences and not unduly influenced by the researcher's personal biases or assumptions. The findings were also shared with other transformational leaders who confirmed that they are indeed aligned to their experiences and observations.

The above four pillars collectively upheld the trustworthiness and rigor of this qualitative research (Healthcare Humanized, 2024).

4.10. Limitations

Several limitations were encountered during the data collection of this study, which may have influenced the breadth and depth of the findings. Firstly, a degree of hesitancy was observed among potential participants, many of whom demonstrated reluctance to engage in the data collection process. Among those who participated,

some expressed apprehension about sharing candid experiences or perspectives due to concerns regarding potential professional or organisational repercussions. This reticence may have constrained the richness and authenticity of the data obtained.

Accessibility and availability of key participants also posed a significant challenge. To mitigate scheduling constraints and logistical barriers, several participants requested that the interview questions be shared electronically via email. While this approach facilitated participation, it limited opportunities for in-depth, real-time probing and follow-up discussions that could have yielded more nuanced insights.

Additionally, restricted access to relevant labour law authorities, whom the researcher had initially intended to engage for contextual and regulatory perspectives, further constrained the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Finally, the limited timeframe allocated for the execution and completion of the research presented a substantial constraint. The time pressure affected the extent to which data could be collected, analysed, and triangulated, thereby potentially limiting the overall depth of interpretation and the scope of generalisability.

4.11 Conclusion

The methodological foundation of the study has been detailed in this chapter, outlining how the chosen interpretivist philosophy and qualitative, inductive approach enabled a deep exploration of leadership inequality within South Africa's private sector. Through narrative inquiry, the study captured authentic accounts of how symbolic violence, exclusionary practices, and unequal access to capital shape leadership trajectories and inhibit the advancement of women into top management and executive roles.

The methodological framework ensured alignment between theory and empirical investigation. By applying Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus, the study was able to examine leadership development not as a neutral process but as one

embedded in relational power structures. The narrative thematic analysis facilitated the identification of recurrent themes and relational mechanisms that perpetuate inequality, directly addressing the research questions outlined in Chapter 3.

This chapter also emphasised methodological rigour through strategies to ensure credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. These measures enhanced the trustworthiness and validity of the research findings. Despite limitations related to participant availability and time constraints, the methodological design effectively captured rich, contextualised insights that contribute to both theoretical and practical understanding.

In conclusion, this chapter serves as the bridge between the study's conceptual foundations and its empirical findings. The subsequent chapter—Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion—presents and interprets the results emerging from this methodological process. It integrates participants' narratives with theoretical constructs to illuminate how symbolic violence operates in leadership contexts and to identify potential strategies for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the South African private sector.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1. Introduction

As highlighted in Chapter 2, numerous scholars have established that symbolic violence constitutes a pervasive yet often invisible barrier to diversity and inclusion within top management, disproportionately constraining women's career progression. While this phenomenon has been extensively documented in global contexts, there is limited evidence to suggest whether similar patterns exist within the South African private sector. This absence of context-specific knowledge created both a curiosity and an assumption gap, which ultimately provided the impetus for this study.

This chapter presents the key findings derived from participants' responses, addressing the research questions formulated in Chapter 3. The chapter begins with an overview of the sample and the selection criteria applied in participant recruitment. It then outlines the data analysis approach employed, as discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Thereafter, the findings are presented in relation to each research question, organised thematically according to patterns that emerged during analysis.

5.2. Sample Overview

A total of seventeen (16) participants were interviewed, comprising thirteen (11) women and five (5) men, as presented in Table 2. All participants occupied leadership positions within the South African private sector, ranging from middle to senior management levels. The sampling strategy deliberately encompassed a diversity of sectors and industries to illustrate the pervasiveness of symbolic violence across varied organizational contexts.

Consideration was also given to age diversity, ensuring representation across generational cohorts. Furthermore, participants from different racial backgrounds were intentionally included. This multidimensional sampling approach strengthened the study's alignment with its core objective of examining leadership dynamics and career advancement within heterogeneous workplace settings.

Table 2: Sample Overview

	Race & Gender	Sector/Industry	Level of Leadership	Age Group
P1	African Female	Research and Development	Senior Management	35-44
P2	African Female	Handling and Storage	Top Management	45-54
P3	African Female	Logistics	Top Management	35-44
P4	African Female	Petrochemical	Middle Management	25-34
P5	African Female	Manufacturing	Middle Management	35-44
P6	African Female	Mining	Middle Management	45-54
P7	African Female	Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	Middle Management	35-44
P8	Coloured Female	Financial Services	Middle Management	35-44
P9	Indian Female	Chemical Production	Senior Management	29-34
P10	White Female	Employee health and Wellness	Top Management	45-54
P11	African Female	Manufacturing	Senior Management	35-44
P12	African Male	Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	Middle Management	45-54
P13	African Male	Petrochemical	Middle Management	35-44
P14	African Male	ICT/Cybersecurity	Senior Management	35-44
P15	African Male	Petrochemical	Middle Management	45-54
P16	African Male	Chemical	Middle Management	45-54

5.3. Data Analysis Approach

Data analysis was undertaken using ATLAS.ti software, guided by a narrative thematic analysis framework as outlined in Chapter 4. The results are structured around five principal themes that emerged, each comprising a set of interrelated sub-themes. An overview of these sub-themes is presented in Figure 4. To ensure analytic transparency and rigour, the relationships among themes, sub-themes, and some of the participants' illustrative responses are systematically summarised in Appendix 1, provided at the conclusion of this chapter.

Collectively, the identified themes encapsulate key challenges, including barriers, biases, systemic dynamics, issues of governance, policy, and accountability that impede or disadvantage women's career progression within the private sector. Each theme is presented through a descriptive narrative, substantiated by direct participant evidence, and concludes with a summary of the observed implications. While this chapter maintains a data-driven orientation, broader interpretation and integration with existing literature will be undertaken in Chapter 6.

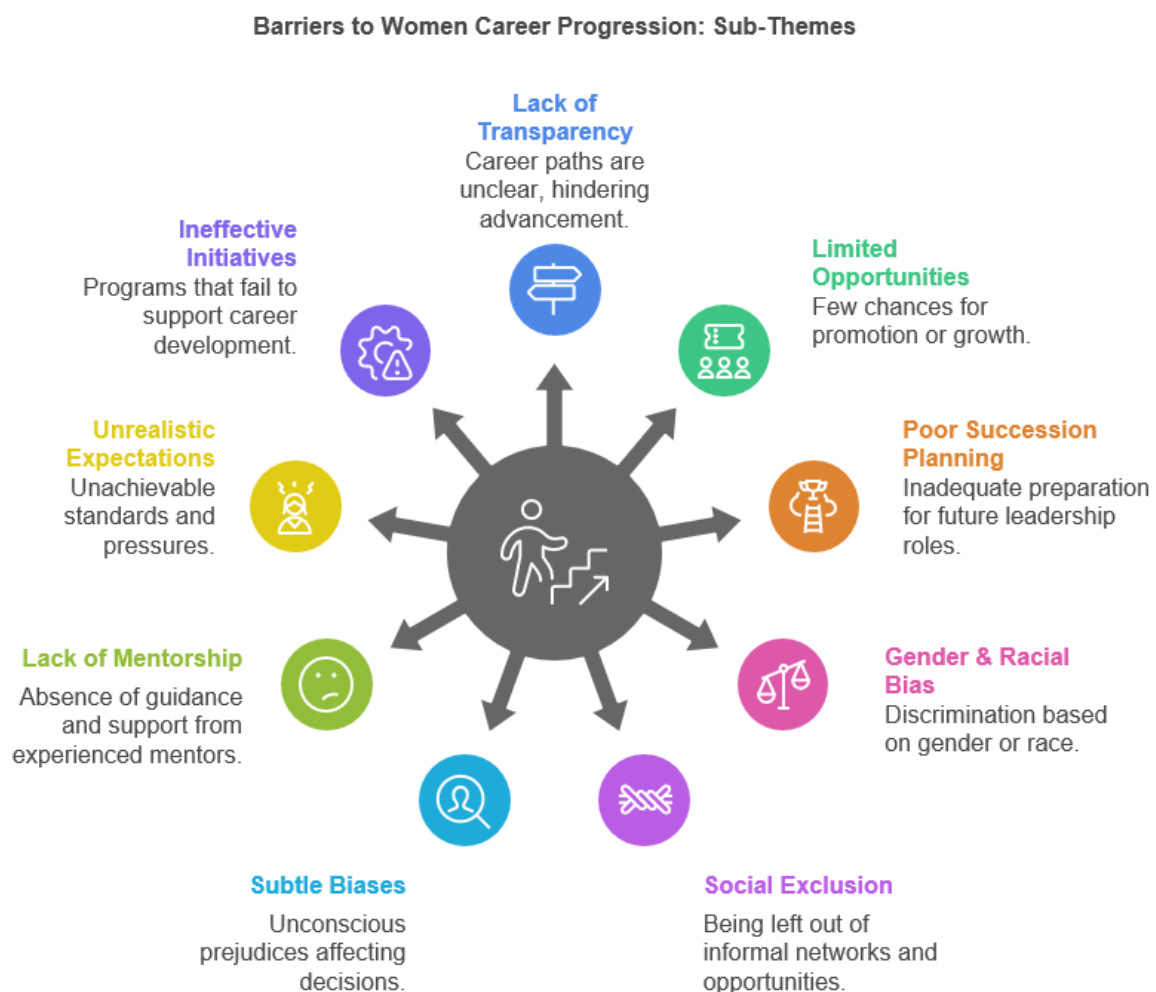


Figure 4

Sub-Themes. (Author's own design)

Note. These are the sub-themes that emerged from the findings.

5.4. Results

The findings of the study as they emerged from participant accounts are presented in this section. The findings are structured around key themes that reflect barriers, biases, and systemic issues influencing women's career advancement. Each theme is presented with a descriptive narrative, supported by participant evidence, and concludes with observed implications.

5.4.1. Research Question One

How does symbolic violence inhibit women from advancing to Top Management or Executive roles in large organisations to improve diversity and inclusion?

The purpose of this research question is to explore how subtle and often invisible forms of symbolic violence within organisational cultures perpetuate gender inequality and restrict women's advancement to top management roles. It seeks to uncover the implicit beliefs, social norms, and workplace practices that legitimise male dominance and normalise women's underrepresentation in leadership.

By analysing these subtle mechanisms, the study aims to expose how organisational cultures reproduce gender hierarchies despite formal equality initiatives, and to provide deeper insights into how addressing symbolic violence can lead to more authentic and sustainable diversity and inclusion at the executive level. The following themes and sub-themes emerged pertaining to research question one.

5.4.1.1 Structural and Systemic Barriers

5.4.1.1.1 Limited Opportunities and Overlooked for Promotion

A consistent narrative among participants in the male dominated corporates is that women, particularly women of colour, are frequently overlooked for advancement or denied access to development opportunities, despite demonstrable competence and experience. The white female that was interviewed demonstrated that she had the same experience, but in her case it was more a gender challenge than race. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P10 – White lady in top management, aged between 45-54: “I spent 18 years of my career in another sector, which was predominantly a male dominated environment in senior management level and was top heavy. I missed two promotions because I was a female although I had the skills, qualifications and experience. The worst part was that the opportunities were given to males who did not even have the qualifications.”

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: “The mining sector is very hard for women. You really have to develop a thick skin if you are a woman, particularly African women, because you struggle, a lot. It is so painful to see how our African males drag the women down as they progress in their careers.”

P7 – African lady in middle management, aged between 35-44: “Business deals and strategy are discussed over golf. If you are a female who does not play golf, you are left out.”

P9 - Indian lady in senior management, aged between 29-34: “I was denied funding to further my studies, but my colleagues were funded in full for the same post graduate qualification.”

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34: “When I started my current role, I was quite adamant to pursue my MBA, because I already had an NQF level 8 qualification. However, I was influenced to pursue a career-specific course instead of an MBA.”

While the majority of the participants in the male dominated corporates have been or observed others being overlooked for opportunities and funding, a minority of participants reported more supportive environments.

P1 - African lady in senior management, aged between 35-44: “In my experience, I've always had support from my line managers.”

P13 – African male in middle management, aged between 35-44: “Women are progressing well within the organization provided they meet the requirements of the role.”

In Addition, two of the participants are in the female dominated corporates and they shared more positive experiences. P10 started in a male dominated corporate and has moved to a female dominated one. It was interesting to see the totally different culture, norms and practices from her past employer to her current one.

P10 – White lady in top management, aged between 45-54: “In my current field, I progressed because of my skills and all the years of experience.”

P8 - Coloured lady in middle management, aged between 35-44: “The profession is largely female-dominated, which shifts the focus away from traditional gender biases and toward individual capability and leadership impact.”

Across the interviews, participants consistently described experiences of exclusion from promotion and professional development opportunities, despite possessing the requisite skills and qualifications. Women, particularly African women, reported encountering entrenched gender and racial biases that hindered upward mobility. They expressed frustration at being overlooked for promotions in favour of less qualified male counterparts, suggesting that male dominance within organisational hierarchies continues to shape access to leadership pathways. Participants further noted that advancement opportunities often arise through informal channels, disadvantaging women who lack access to influential networks.

Conversely, a small number of participants, particularly those in female-dominated environments, described more equitable experiences where progression was merit-based and reflective of demonstrated competence.

Observed implication: Most women leaders perceive stagnation as frustration due to being consistently overlooked for promotions and developmental opportunities. This experience prompts many to consider leaving their organisations in pursuit of more equitable environments elsewhere.

5.4.1.1.2 Poor Succession Planning and Gendered Appointments

Several participants reported that leadership pipelines did not adequately support women, resulting in gendered appointments that reinforced male dominance in executive roles. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34: “There is lack of transparency in promotions and selection criteria. There are no mentors, even when women are promoted, they are always filtered through a male intermediary, preventing them from directly reporting to senior management.”

P2 - African lady in Top management, aged between 45-54: “There is poor mentorship programmes and lack of succession planning.”

Participants perceived that organisational succession planning mechanisms were inadequately structured to promote gender equity. Several women highlighted a lack of transparency in appointment processes and the absence of mentorship structures to prepare women for senior roles. They also observed that leadership pipelines remain predominantly male-oriented, with women often filtered through male intermediaries, limiting their direct access to executive mentorship and sponsorship. This practice reinforces gendered power dynamics and results in tokenistic or symbolic appointments that serve compliance purposes rather than genuine transformation.

Observed implication: Tokenistic or symbolic appointments erode trust in diversity initiatives and reinforce perceptions of organisational insincerity.

5.4.1.1.3 Lack of Transparency in Career Progression

Participants highlight that promotion criteria are often unclear, with decisions appearing inconsistent or opaque. They perceive that diversity policies often serve as compliance checklists rather than genuine strategies for talent development. Below

are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34: “There is lack of transparency in promotion and selection criteria. Even when women are promoted, they are often filtered through a male intermediary, preventing them from directly reporting to senior management. Two executives were recently appointed in my organisation, but the positions were not advertised.”

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: “In recruitment committees, bias is visible. Labour representatives like us are sometimes excluded from the final selection stages, especially when senior management positions are involved. We’ve fought against this because it’s pure discrimination. Without transparency, management just handpicks people they’re comfortable with, often those from their own networks.”

Participants expressed concern that promotion and selection processes were opaque, inconsistent, and vulnerable to bias. They observed that organisational diversity policies often exist as procedural checklists with little substantive impact on career development. Women in middle and senior management positions reported exclusion from recruitment committees and expressed frustration that senior roles were sometimes filled without open advertisement or transparent evaluation. This lack of clarity and fairness in career advancement processes was widely viewed as a major barrier to trust, morale, and commitment among women professionals.

Observed implication: Ambiguity in career advancement processes fosters distrust, disengagement, and diminished organisational commitment among women professionals.

5.4.1.2 Social and Cultural Barriers

5.4.1.2.1 Gender and Racial Bias

Participants describe pervasive gendered and racialised biases that shape career experiences. Women, especially those of colour, are judged more harshly and often excluded from networks or roles due to discriminatory perceptions. One of the males shared that he also experienced strong racism. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P7 - African lady in middle management, aged between 35-44: “For the very first time, in my current role, my race has proved to be a barrier as my current manager has given favour to those who are of the same race as her. On the gender side, men have an unspoken advantage and get promoted despite having less experience.”

P14 – African male in senior management, aged between 35-44: “I had a white female boss who was racist and discriminatory. Never believed in a black child, whether black male or female. She only gave opportunities to white counterparts.”

P9 - Indian lady in senior management, aged between 25-34: “In many instances I was told that I was not the right colour for the job, despite being duly qualified and experienced.”

P13 – African male in middle management, aged between 35-44: “Women are seen as soft and cannot take decisive decisions, always put feelings first then making business decision.”

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: “The biggest barrier is the persistent perception that women are weak. Even when a woman has an engineering degree, she’s judged as fragile or incapable. The work environment doesn’t give her a fair chance to prove herself. She’s already labelled before she even starts.”

In Contrast, the participants that are working in female dominated corporates shared more positive experiences.

P8 - Coloured lady in middle management, aged between 35-44: “The profession is largely female-dominated, which shifts the focus away from traditional gender biases and toward individual capability and leadership impact.”

Participants consistently reported that gender and racial biases remain deeply embedded within organisational structures and cultures. Women of colour described facing compounded discrimination that undermined their legitimacy, limited their access to leadership roles, and diminished their professional confidence.

Several participants observed that men are often perceived as more decisive and capable, while women are stereotyped as emotional, weak, or unsuitable for demanding positions, regardless of their qualifications or achievements. Instances of racial exclusion were also reported, with some participants describing preferential treatment towards employees of the same race as their managers.

A small number of participants, particularly those in female-dominated professions, noted more inclusive environments where performance was prioritised over gender or race. However, the prevailing sentiment among most participants highlighted the persistence of intersectional discrimination that continues to impede women’s progression into senior management.

Observed implication: Intersectional discrimination compounds the disadvantage faced by women of colour. While some men report racial bias, the intersection of gender and race presents a particularly entrenched challenge to authentic inclusion.

5.4.1.2.2 Social Exclusion and Informal Networks

A significant barrier is exclusion from informal networks and social events where important decisions or relationships are forged. Male-dominated cultures often sideline women. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: “Senior male managers often leave work early to play golf. Many decisions are made during these events, outside the formal boardroom, where women are rarely invited.”

P2 - African lady in Top management, aged between 45-54: “Only male executives participate in golf tournaments, perpetuating a boy’s club and leaving out female executives in company events.”

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34: “There is definitely a boy’s clubs. You don’t find yourself in certain spaces because of gender and race.”

P9 - Indian lady in senior management, aged between 25-34: “Men tend to hang out socially and engage in sports and other activities. things which women are excluded from.”

Many participants identified exclusion from informal networks and social spaces as a critical barrier to career advancement. They observed that key decisions and influential discussions often occur in male-dominated spaces such as golf courses or informal social gatherings, spaces from which women are routinely excluded. This “boys’ club” culture was described as not only marginalising women but also depriving them of mentorship, sponsorship, and advocacy opportunities that are essential for visibility and progression.

Women in senior roles expressed frustration that their exclusion from these informal circles perpetuated a cycle of invisibility, reinforcing organisational hierarchies and sustaining male privilege. These experiences illustrate how relational dynamics outside formal structures can significantly shape access to power and influence within organisations.

Observed implication: Excluding woman from social and informal networks restrict access to mentorship, sponsorship, and career-advancing opportunities.

5.4.1.2.3 Subtle Biases and Forced Conformity

Women describe pressures to emulate male leadership behaviours to gain legitimacy, often at the cost of authenticity and values. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P 10 – White lady in top management, aged between 45-54: “In my previous environment, Sadly, very toxic, crucifying your values if you want to grow. I'm just one of those people that I would not. I didn't want to move somewhere and not have it resonate with my values because it would make me an unhappy employee. When I spoke my mind, I was seen as aggressive. I was always labelled as a troublemaker.”

P9 - Indian lady in senior management, aged between 29-34: “I was told many times as a leader that people expected me to be more like my male colleagues as my leadership style was too mothering and soft.”

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34: “As a woman, you need to be palatable, you can't be too outspoken, because you are then seen as not palatable. Whereas if a man is outspoken, it's acceptable, leadership would normally say, you know him, he does not have a filter. If you are a woman, you must have a filter.”

Participants revealed that subtle, everyday biases often compel women to conform to dominant masculine leadership norms to gain credibility. Many women described feeling pressured to suppress authentic behaviours and adopt more assertive or “tough” personas to be taken seriously. Those who resisted conformity or demonstrated strong opinions were frequently labelled as aggressive or difficult, while similar behaviour in men was normalised as confidence or leadership.

This double standard forced women to navigate a narrow behavioural spectrum, balancing professionalism with palatability, to avoid negative stereotyping. Some participants shared that compromising personal values in pursuit of acceptance led to emotional strain and diminished job satisfaction.

Collectively, these narratives reveal how symbolic violence operates through subtle cultural expectations that silence women's voices and undermine their authenticity in leadership contexts.

Observed implication: Such subtle but pervasive biases diminish women's visibility, silence their contributions, and erode confidence in leadership contexts.

5.4.1.3 Developmental and Leadership Barriers

5.4.1.3.1 Lack of Mentorship and Guidance

Younger women report an absence of accessible mentors or role models, limiting opportunities for professional development and executive leadership preparation. This is also validated by one of the executives who has observed it in her environment. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34: "There are no mentors that guide potential leaders and there is lack of transparency in the promotion and selection criteria."

P9 - Indian lady in senior management, aged between 25-34: "Have more female leaders who actually care about other females. not females who get to top management and decide to behave exactly like their male counterparts. insensitive and unkind."

P2 - African lady in Top management, aged between 45-54: "Younger female colleagues do not have 'safe and approachable' senior managers that can mentor them. They end up being highly educated and upset, as they do not get any guidance on what/how to develop themselves to be considered for a promotion."

Participants consistently emphasised the absence of structured mentorship and developmental support for aspiring women leaders. Younger women expressed that

they lacked accessible role models and senior figures who could offer practical guidance or advocate for their progression.

Several participants highlighted that while formal policies on mentorship exist, these are seldom operationalised or prioritised in practice. As a result, women are left to navigate their career trajectories independently, often without feedback, exposure, or support.

Participants also noted that some senior women, once in leadership positions, tend to adopt the prevailing masculine leadership culture rather than nurturing or empowering emerging female talent.

Collectively, these insights underscore a systemic gap in leadership pipeline development, where the lack of genuine mentorship perpetuates stagnation and self-doubt among women in middle management.

Observed implication: The absence of mentorship perpetuates self-doubt and stifles leadership pipeline development for women.

5.4.1.3.2 Unrealistic Expectations and Leadership Style Pressures

5.4.1.3.3 Ineffective Initiatives and Denied Support

Many participants viewed gender initiatives as ineffective, driven by compliance targets rather than meaningful inclusion. Others reported being denied funding for further studies or leadership development. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P9 - Indian lady in senior management, aged between 25-34: “I was denied funding to further my studies, but my colleagues were funded in full for the same post graduate qualification.”

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34: “From what I've heard in the meetings that I've been in, some initiatives are more for BBBEE

scores and keeping the Department of Labour happy. So the initiatives are not genuine

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: “Honestly, they are not genuine. Everything is done for compliance purposes only, to satisfy employment equity (EE) requirements. There’s no real commitment to transformation.”

Across the narratives, participants reported that women in leadership are often subjected to heightened scrutiny and unrealistic expectations. They observed that women must work harder than their male counterparts to prove competence and legitimacy, yet their leadership styles are frequently judged through gendered lenses. Assertive women are perceived as abrasive, while collaborative leaders are viewed as weak or indecisive.

This double bind creates continuous pressure to balance authority with likability. Participants also reflected that organisational cultures tend to reward conformity to traditional, male-defined leadership norms rather than valuing diverse approaches.

Consequently, many women feel compelled to adjust their communication styles and suppress authenticity to avoid criticism, which in turn diminishes confidence and emotional well-being.

Observed implication: Lack of real support reinforced skepticism toward organizational diversity agendas.

5.4.1.4 Organisational Culture & Norms

There are several organisational culture and norms that emerged from the data. Women in middle and senior management need to identify and navigate through these with extra caution. The way women respond to these norms determines whether their access to top leadership advancements is granted or denied. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

5.4.1.4.1 Organisational Culture & Norms

Participants demonstrate that women need to position themselves in a certain way to align with the organisations' culture and norms in order to be considered for top management opportunities.

P9 - Indian lady in senior management, aged between 25-34: "Strong women in industry are often seen as unfriendly and aggressive. If a male had to behave in the same way as strong female, he would not be judged as harshly as she would be."

P8 - Coloured lady in middle management, aged between 35-44: "I'm not currently in an executive role, I'm deliberately cultivating executive presence. This goes beyond the scope of my work, it's about the impression I leave and how I position myself to inspire confidence, so that even in my absence, others are inclined to advocate for me."

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: "There's a culture here where if you're quiet and agreeable, a "yes-person", you get along fine. But if you question things or challenge decisions, you're labelled a troublemaker. In addition, men feel inferior when a woman is more qualified, like a female geologist or engineer. It threatens their sense of authority, and as a result, some even resort to sabotaging women's work. This industry can be very difficult and brutal in that sense."

Participants highlighted that organisational culture and prevailing norms strongly influence women's access to leadership opportunities. Many described a pervasive expectation to conform to unspoken behavioural standards that align with traditionally masculine ideals of leadership.

Women who challenge these norms or assert themselves are frequently labelled as aggressive or difficult, whereas similar behaviours in men are viewed as confidence and strength. Participants shared that advancing within such environments often requires deliberate self-positioning, projecting "executive presence" and cultivating perceptions of approachability to earn advocacy and legitimacy.

Others noted that compliance and agreeableness are tacitly rewarded, while those who question decisions or exercise independent thought risk being marginalised or branded as troublemakers. This dynamic reflects how cultural conformity functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that regulates women's visibility, influence, and career progression.

Observed implication: Women in middle and senior management need to identify the specific organisational culture & norms and navigate through these with extra caution. If they miss this, their access to top leadership advancements is denied.

5.4.1.4.2 Psychological Safety

Participants consistently indicate that organisational cultures demand conformity and penalise dissenting voices, producing climates of low psychological safety. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34: "Questions and/or different views were interpreted as insubordination in my previous organisation. There was an instant where I asked questions and I was told that I should not ask because it will be seen as insubordination. Management did not want me to ask questions because I had identified a gap in their thought process."

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: "There was a case where a manager wanted to promote a woman who didn't meet the requirements for a position. When I questioned it, they accused me of being against her. But my concern was about fairness and protecting women from being tokenism or set up for failure. If we put someone in a role they're not qualified for, it only reinforces stereotypes that women can't perform. We want women to be respected for their competence, not pitied, undermined or controlled."

Participants expressed that organisational environments frequently lack psychological safety, discouraging open dialogue and critical engagement. Many recounted experiences where questioning leadership decisions or highlighting inconsistencies was interpreted as defiance or insubordination. Such reactions were seen as reflective of rigid hierarchies that prioritise obedience over innovation.

Some participants also observed that tokenistic promotions or poorly justified appointments of women can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes about female incompetence, thereby weakening collective progress toward gender equity. The absence of trust and openness within these contexts contributes to fear of reprisal, self-censorship, and disengagement. Overall, participants perceived that cultures characterised by low psychological safety hinder authenticity, creativity, and mutual respect, while entrenching symbolic violence through silence and conformity.

Observed implication: Fear of reprisal discourages open dialogue and limits innovation, thereby reinforcing hierarchical power structures.

5.4.1.5 Governance, Policy & Accountability

5.4.1.5.1 Accountability & Policy Implementation

Effective governance, underpinned by robust policy frameworks and accountability mechanisms, is a fundamental determinant of equitable organisational transformation. Within the context of gender equity and inclusion, accountability extends beyond compliance with legislative mandates to encompass the ethical and cultural dimensions of leadership. The implementation of diversity and inclusion policies often reveals a disparity between formal commitments and practical enactment. This disconnect manifests when organisational actors adopt performative approaches to equity, publicly endorsing inclusion while failing to institutionalise accountability structures that sustain change. The perspectives below illustrate how policy intentions may be undermined by inconsistent implementation and limited organisational transparency. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: “Companies often argue that they don’t want to set a precedent, meaning they know they’re wrong but don’t want to admit it, because that would require them to treat others fairly in the future.”

P2 - African lady in Top management, aged between 45-54: “Skills are more important than relationships for Top Management. It is important that employees are able to deliver on their mandate and can be held accountable for their performance. I believe relationships are secondary.”

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: “We have tried, but the way those engagements are structured doesn’t work. They invite unions to fancy workshops instead of coming to the company to see the real situation. We’ve asked them to visit workplaces and review records because the truth is in the data, not in the meetings. When they call us to their offices, it doesn’t reflect the actual reality.”

P6’s observations exposed how symbolic and structural resistance to accountability perpetuates systemic inequities. Avoidance of responsibility not only safeguards organisational reputation but also reinforces existing hierarchies by discouraging redress and transformation. She further critiqued the disconnect between policy discourse and operational reality. Her second statement underscores the superficial nature of some policy engagements, where symbolic gestures replace substantive oversight. The emphasis on formal meetings over evidence-based site engagement reflects a governance gap that obscures genuine accountability.

Similarly, P2, underscored the importance of meritocratic principles in governance. Her perspective reflected a belief in competency-based governance models, yet it also highlighted a tension between meritocracy and relational dynamics. When accountability mechanisms are inconsistently applied, merit may be compromised by informal networks and subjective assessments, further entrenching inequality.

Observed implication: The data suggest that governance and accountability mechanisms within organisations are frequently performative rather than

transformative. Policies intended to promote equity may exist in documentation but lack effective enforcement or contextual sensitivity.

5.4.1.6 Research Question One Conclusion

In the male dominated corporates, symbolic violence operates through structural and cultural mechanisms that normalise gender exclusion within organisational systems. Women's advancement is curtailed by opaque processes, exclusionary social networks, and cultural expectations that reward compliance over competence. Despite formal diversity policies, informal norms and power relations continue to privilege male dominance, reproducing inequality in subtle but enduring ways.

Conversely, female dominated corporates value skill and experience. This creates a conducive environment for women to flourish.

The reluctance to acknowledge institutional shortcomings perpetuates symbolic violence by silencing critical reflection and sustaining inequitable practices under the guise of procedural compliance.

Moreover, policy implementation processes often prioritise image management and procedural adherence over experiential validity and empirical evidence. This misalignment weakens employee trust, diminishes policy credibility, and obstructs cultural transformation. To advance genuine equity, accountability structures must transition from bureaucratic compliance to participatory governance, anchored in transparency, inclusive engagement, and data-driven evaluation.

Organisations should therefore strengthen internal audit mechanisms, integrate lived experiences into policy evaluation, and cultivate leadership accountability frameworks that move beyond rhetoric. Equitable progress demands governance systems that not only recognise inequities but also act decisively to dismantle them through measurable, enforceable, and transparent practices.

5.4.2. Research Question Two

How do relationships and skills interact to shape access to top management, and which is perceived to hold greater influence?

This question examines the extent to which relational networks and professional competencies interact to influence access to executive positions. The findings indicate that while technical expertise is necessary, it is often insufficient on its own. Relational capital, comprising trust, visibility, sponsorship, and alignment with powerful networks, emerges as a decisive factor that determines who advances to the upper echelons of leadership. The following themes and sub-themes emerged pertaining to research question two.

5.4.2.1 Organisational Culture & Norms

5.4.2.1.1 Relationships and Trust

Across the narratives, participants emphasise that trust and relationships are central to progression into top management. In most organisations, relationship-building is perceived as more influential than demonstrable skill or performance. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34:

“Relationships are more important than skills for top management advancement. You need a sponsor that will mention your name in certain rooms. There’s a perception that skills can be taught.”

P9 - Indian lady in senior management, aged between 25-34:

“People want to work with people who they can trust. You cannot trust someone you don’t have a relationship with.”

P8 - Coloured lady in middle management, aged between 35-44:

“Relationship building becomes increasingly critical as one progress within an organisation. At senior levels, success is often driven by the ability to influence stakeholders and achieve outcomes through collaboration and strategic alignment with others.”

P7 - African lady in middle management, aged between 35-44: “By the time you have reached top management, you have proven your ability to do the functional job. Your ability to network therefore becomes more important.”

P1 - African lady in senior management, aged between 35-44: “Skills can take you to a certain level, right? However, the way you show up. your attitude which I can link to relationships will take you to the C suit levels and executive roles.”

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: “In theory, skills should matter most. But in practice, relationships often determine who gets promoted. It’s about who you know, not what you know.”

“Even in recruitment committees, bias is visible. Labour representatives like us are sometimes excluded from the final selection stages, especially when senior management positions are involved. We’ve fought against this because it’s pure discrimination. Without transparency, management just handpicks people they’re comfortable with, often those from their own networks.”

Conversely, a minority of participants maintain that technical capability holds greater importance and relationships come secondary.

P13 – African male in middle management, aged between 35-44: “I believe skills are more important than relationships”

P2 - African lady in Top management, aged between 45-54: “Skills are more important than relationships for Top Management. It is important that employees are able to deliver on their mandate and can be held accountable for their performance. I believe relationships are secondary.”

One of the participants was adamant that skills and relationships are equally important in senior leadership.

P14 – African male in senior management, aged between 35-44: “Top management requires someone with skills, but relationship management is equally important. You need strong relationship management skills to maintain certain key accounts with customers.”

Across the narratives, participants overwhelmingly emphasised that relationships and trust are decisive factors in attaining top management positions. They noted that while technical competence establishes professional credibility, relational capital, comprising visibility, sponsorship, and alignment with powerful networks, ultimately determines advancement. Participants described how informal alliances and social proximity to senior leaders often influence promotion decisions more strongly than measurable performance or qualifications. Many viewed this dynamic as reinforcing exclusionary practices, since women and other marginalised groups frequently lack access to these influential networks.

Several participants explained that progression into executive roles requires not only demonstrated skill but also the ability to cultivate strategic relationships, navigate organisational politics, and inspire confidence among decision-makers. They further observed that trust is frequently built through informal interactions, often in male-dominated spaces, where women's participation remains limited.

A minority of participants, however, maintained that skills should take precedence over relationships, asserting that accountability and competence are more sustainable measures of leadership effectiveness.

One participant suggested that both skills and relationships are equally important, as executive leadership requires a balance between technical acumen and interpersonal influence.

Collectively, participants' accounts illustrate a pervasive belief that advancement within top management is largely relational rather than merit based. This perception reveals how symbolic forms of power operate through social networks, perpetuating exclusion while appearing neutral or culturally normative.

Observed implication: These dynamics reinforce existing social hierarchies and privileges those who are already networked within organisational power circles, thereby reproducing symbolic violence in subtle but consequential ways.

5.4.4.3. Research Question Two Conclusion

The findings reveal that in male dominated corporate contexts, advancement is contingent not merely on competence but on strategic relationship-building and social integration into influential networks. Skills establish professional legitimacy, but relationships determine access to opportunity. Consequently, individuals who are excluded from these informal relational spaces, most notably women, face structural disadvantages that limit visibility, endorsement, and sponsorship. This suggests that leadership advancement processes remain deeply relational rather than purely meritocratic, thereby sustaining patterns of exclusion under the guise of neutral organisational culture.

5.4.3. Research Question Three

How does lack of sponsorship hinder diversity and inclusion in top management?

The purpose of this research question is to investigate how the absence of active sponsorship limits women's career progression and perpetuates homogeneity within executive leadership. Sponsorship, defined as advocacy by influential leaders who publicly endorse and create opportunities for high-potential talent, is distinguished from mentorship by its active, outcome-oriented nature. The findings show that without sponsorship, women struggle to gain visibility in decision-making spaces and are consequently underrepresented in senior leadership structures. The following themes and sub-themes emerged pertaining to research question three.

5.4.3.1 Organisational Culture & Norms

Participants identify informal, male-dominated social structures, particularly golf clubs and other exclusive networks, as primary contexts where sponsorship relationships are cultivated. These environments often exclude women, both socially and professionally, reinforcing systemic gender imbalances.

5.4.3.1.1 Relationships and Trust

The study indicates that lack of strong influential relationships and trust limits sponsorship advocacy which subsequently inhibits women's progression to top

management. Below are some of the most pertinent comments that were raised by the participants under this theme.

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34:

“Relationships are more important than skills for top management advancements. You need a sponsor that will mention your name in certain rooms. There’s a perception that skills can be taught.”

P3 - African lady in Top management, aged between 35-44: “Socialising and networking does not come naturally for me, but I understood that it something one must do.”

P2 - African lady in Top management, aged between 45-54: “Informal networks such as golf club influence promotions or opportunities in many organisations. Only male executives participate in golf tournaments, perpetuating a boy’s club and leaving out female executives in company events.”

Participants consistently highlighted that trusted relationships with senior leaders play a decisive role in career progression within corporate environments. Advancement was often perceived as contingent upon personal alliances and informal networks rather than on objective performance metrics.

Those who cultivated strong relationships with influential leaders were more likely to receive strategic assignments, sponsorship, and visible career opportunities.

Conversely, individuals, particularly women, who lacked access to these networks faced slower progression and limited inclusion in decision-making spaces. Trust was described as both a facilitator of opportunity and a gatekeeping mechanism that reinforced existing hierarchies and power dynamics.

Observed implication: The exclusion of women from informal sponsorship networks significantly weakens diversity outcomes and reinforces perceptions of inequity in organisational advancement processes.

5.4.3.3 Research Question Three Conclusion

The participants' responses reveal that sponsorship opportunities are often initiated and reinforced through informal social interactions and events that take place outside formal workplace settings.

These settings are often characterised by homosocial reproduction, where individuals in positions of power preferentially associate with and promote others who share similar social identities. They are typically organised by and for men. In addition, they tend to exclude women from critical networking and advocacy opportunities. As a result, women are marginalised and experience limited access to the social capital necessary to secure sponsorship, visibility, and endorsement for leadership advancement.

This systemic exclusion reinforces existing gendered power structures and exacerbates the interpersonal engagement deficits that continue to impede women's progression to top executive roles.

5.5. Participants Recommendations

5.5.1. Introduction: Participants Recommendations

This section presents the recommendations provided by participants who found this study crucial and shared practical insights drawn from their personal and professional experiences within South Africa's corporate sector. Their contributions reveal a shared recognition that meaningful transformation requires deliberate, sustained action that extends beyond compliance with employment legislation.

While many organisations publicly endorse gender equity and inclusion, participants emphasised that these commitments often remain superficial, with limited progress in dismantling systemic barriers that disadvantage women, particularly women of colour.

Participants advocated for organisational accountability, transparent promotion processes, and the consistent implementation of employment equity and succession planning policies. They stressed that equitable advancement opportunities must be anchored in merit, competence, and authentic leadership rather than conformity to

masculinised organisational cultures. Furthermore, the findings highlighted that transformation efforts cannot rest solely on the goodwill of individual companies. Participants specifically called for the active involvement of state authorities, particularly the Department of Employment Labour (DoEL) and the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE), to enforce compliance through regular inspections, stricter monitoring, and the issuance of Section 54 compliance orders where equity targets are neglected.

By incorporating these multi-level interventions spanning individual, organisational, and regulatory domains, the participants' recommendations provide a holistic approach to reducing symbolic violence. Their collective insights illuminate how authentic transformation can be achieved when legislative enforcement aligns with inclusive corporate practices that nurture mentorship, skill development, and women's confidence in leadership spaces.

P2 - African lady in Top management, aged between 45-54: "Organisations must act upon their Employment Equity targets. They must ensure that all employees have access to mentors and that succession planning is implemented and employees are upskilled and prepared for growth and promotions."

P3 - African lady in Top management, aged between 35-44: "Find an organisation that has a culture that resonate with you and that is genuine with promotions where skills play a significant role."

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34: "Management must have more transparency in the promotion processes and better communication from top management about expectations and selection criteria."

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: "First, government departments like the Department of Employment and Labour (DoEL) and the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) need to take a stronger stance. They should be stricter in enforcing transformation laws and issue more Section 54s (compliance orders) when companies fail to meet equity standards."

“They should visit workplaces more often, talk to employees directly, and review employment records to see who’s been stuck in the same position for years despite having the right qualifications. I’ve seen young women with technical trades like diesel mechanics or electricians who never get opportunities for in-service training. When positions open, they’re simply overlooked.”

“Companies need to be held accountable, not just allowed to tick boxes.”

P7 - African lady in middle management, aged between 35-44: “Companies need to be more intentional about dismantling gender stereotypes.”

P8 - Coloured lady in middle management, aged between 35-44: “Cultivating confidence and reinforcing the understanding that women’s voices and contributions are equally valuable is essential in shifting this dynamic. I’m not currently in an executive role but I’m deliberately cultivating executive presence. This goes beyond the scope of my work, it’s about the impression I leave and how I position myself to inspire confidence, so that even in my absence, others are inclined to advocate for me.”

P9 - Indian lady in senior management, aged between 25-34: “Have more female leaders who care about other females. not females who get to top management and decide to behave exactly like their male counterparts. insensitive and unkind.”

P 10 – White lady in top management, aged between 45-54: “Women must support and empower one another. In my previous environment, female leaders often hindered other women’s progress due to competitiveness or favouritism. I encourage honesty, collaboration, and mentorship among women. As Brené Brown says, embracing vulnerability and authenticity is key to leadership and growth.”

“Mentorship is crucial and helped me, from both women and men, it played a vital role in my progression. I was given space to learn, fail, and grow without fear of judgment.”

P13 – African male in middle management, aged between 35-44: “Companies must have strong leadership programs for women in preparation for future roles.”

P14 – African male in senior management, aged between 35-44: “Women need to be given separate leadership advancement opportunities with proper mentoring.”

P15 – African male in middle management, aged between 45-54: “Women must have self believe and thrive for change in seeking advancement.”

5.5.2. Conclusion: Participants Recommendations

The participants’ recommendations reveal that the eradication of symbolic violence within South African corporates requires both systemic reform and personal agency. The call for stronger enforcement by the DoEL and DMRE highlights the necessity of government accountability in driving transformation beyond policy rhetoric. Through regular workplace audits, transparent reporting, and punitive measures against non-compliance, these authorities can ensure that equity policies translate into tangible opportunities for women’s advancement.

At the organisational level, participants advocated for fair and transparent promotion systems, consistent mentorship, and leadership development programmes that prepare women for senior roles. They also emphasised the importance of cultivating cultures where collaboration, authenticity, and inclusivity are valued as leadership strengths rather than liabilities. Importantly, several participants reflected on the role of women themselves in championing one another, building confidence, and rejecting the need to emulate masculine leadership models to succeed.

Collectively, these recommendations present a pragmatic and actionable framework for reducing symbolic violence and advancing gender equity within South Africa’s private sector. They call for a coordinated effort among organisations, policymakers, and individuals to foster environments where women can thrive as authentic leaders. By aligning institutional accountability with individual empowerment, South African corporates can move closer to achieving genuine transformation, one that reflects fairness, inclusivity, and the recognition of diverse leadership potential.

5.6. Results Conclusion

This chapter presents an integrated analysis of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding barriers to women's advancement in the South African private sector. The findings reveal that symbolic violence manifests through interlocking structural, cultural, and developmental mechanisms that collectively sustain gender inequality within organisational hierarchies.

Structural factors, such as limited advancement opportunities, poor succession planning, and opaque promotion criteria, reproduce exclusion through institutional processes that appear neutral yet yield systematically unequal outcomes. Cultural and social dynamics, including gender and racial bias, exclusion from informal networks, and expectations of conformity to masculine norms, further entrench symbolic dominance.

Developmental barriers, particularly the absence of mentorship and sponsorship—deprive women of essential guidance and advocacy required for career progression.

Across all themes, the findings demonstrate that formal diversity and inclusion policies often fail to challenge underlying cultural norms that perpetuate inequality. Instead, these policies frequently operate symbolically, maintaining organisational legitimacy while leaving entrenched power relations intact.

Conversely, female dominated corporates value skill and experience. This creates a conducive environment for women to flourish.

Overall, the chapter underscores that true inclusion requires not only equitable policies but a deliberate transformation of organisational culture. One that recognises and dismantles the subtle mechanisms of symbolic violence embedded in everyday practices. The next chapter discusses these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, offering recommendations for promoting authentic, sustainable inclusion in leadership contexts.

Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings

6.1 Introduction

This chapter critically interprets the findings presented in Chapter 5 by drawing direct links to the theoretical and empirical literature discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. The discussion is structured around the three central research questions that guided this study. In addition, the discussion is anchored in Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, capital, and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990, 2001), as well as contemporary leadership and diversity theories (Ely et al., 2011; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020; Day et al., 2021).

The chapter unpacks how the lived experiences or observations of participants, particularly women in South Africa's private sector, reflect, reinforce, or challenge the theoretical and policy frameworks governing diversity and inclusion. The integration of empirical and theoretical insights reveals that structural inequities, gendered organisational cultures, and deficient sponsorship mechanisms collectively sustain symbolic violence and inhibit leadership transformation.

6.2 Discussion: Research Question One

How does symbolic violence inhibit women from advancing to top management or executive roles in large organisations to improve diversity and inclusion?

The findings demonstrate that symbolic violence manifests in subtle, systemic, and cultural ways that normalise gendered exclusion from executive as indicated by Chidambaran et al. (2022) in Chapter 1. These findings echo the theoretical propositions outlined in Chapter 1 (Sims et al., 2019; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020) and the Bourdieusian lens developed in Chapter 2, which conceptualised symbolic violence as the invisible mechanism through which privilege is legitimised and inequality reproduced.

Moreover, the manifestations align with Scheepers et al. (2018) who revealed that lack of appropriate sponsorship hinders progression to top management. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the findings and related to research question one are discussed in this section.

6.2.1 Structural and Systemic Barriers

Participants reported limited access to promotions, opaque succession planning, and tokenistic diversity initiatives, conditions that reproduce the rational model of inequality (Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2010). Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey (2010) defined the rational model of inequality as a mechanism where dominant groups control organisational fields (Bourdieu, 1990), defining what forms of capital, social networks, masculine behaviours, or strategic alliances are most valued. These scholars further shared that this system legitimises exclusion as meritocratic, despite evidence that equally or more qualified women are systematically overlooked.

Such practices mirror Sims et al. (2019) and Ng & Sears (2020), who argue that leadership diversity in South Africa remains hindered by cultural hierarchies that privilege male habitus and reinforce structural inertia. The absence of transparent advancement criteria and the selective allocation of developmental funding observed in this study further validate Chidambaran et al.'s (2022) findings that organisational compliance with Employment Equity Act (EEA) targets remains largely performative. Some of the participants exclusively shared how funding was denied to them while it was ironically granted to their colleagues.

The narratives of participants describing being overlooked for promotions despite proven competence also echo the findings of Sims et al. (2019) and Fitzsimmons & Callan (2020), who highlighted persistent structural barriers in corporate leadership pipelines. Furthermore, the gendered succession planning observed in this study extends Bourdieu's field theory by showing how organisational cultures, specific 'fields', define the forms of capital valued in leadership.

Consequently, women who exhibit traditional leadership styles face double binds: they are either deemed too soft or, if assertive, too aggressive. This finding confirms Ely et al.'s (2011) assertion that leadership identity for women is often contingent upon external validation and alignment with gendered expectations.

6.2.2 Social and Cultural Barriers

Many of the participants shared that golf club is the major social engagement activity, explicitly for male executives, that dominates in corporate. It was also evident that the exclusion is not only affecting the African women, but cuts across women of all races. Participants further elaborated that this activity (golf club) cultivates and strengthens sponsorship, which is a key catalyst for advancing to top management.

The exclusionary impact of this male-dominated informal networks (golf clubs, after-hours socialisation) strongly supports Bourdieu's notion of social capital as a form of exclusionary power. Those already within the dominant field accumulate relational advantages that are inaccessible to outsiders (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). For women, especially black and coloured women, this social exclusion manifests as both gendered and racialised symbolic violence, echoing the intersectional insights of Holvino (2010) and Nkomo (2021), who emphasise that race, gender, and class converge to reproduce inequality in South African organisations.

6.2.3 Organisational Culture, Psychological Safety, and Forced Conformity

The findings clearly indicate that many women, particularly women of colour, are compelled to conform to organisational norms such as adopting masculine behaviours to gain legitimacy that reinforce and privilege male authority. This aligns with the observations of Ely et al. (2011), who argued that leadership identity validation depends on alignment with gendered prototypes. Therefore, women often adhere to masculine modes of behaviour, resulting in the suppression of their authentic identities to gain acceptance within male-dominated environments.

These adaptive performances represent the internalisation of symbolic violence where women silence their authentic selves to survive organisational fields that reward conformity and penalise dissent. The observed lack of psychological safety further reinforces Morgan & Björkert's (2006) contention that symbolic violence produces emotional fatigue, self-doubt, and disengagement.

Ely et al. (2011) further contend that in these fields, masculine traits such as assertiveness are valorised. On the other hand, women are typically perceived as nurturing, collaborative, and selfless; traits that are socially valued but conversely systematically devalued in organisational contexts. Consequently, these gendered perceptions contribute to the marginalisation of women in leadership recognition and advancement opportunities. Such practices foster self-censorship, constrain ambition, and erode women's confidence in professional settings.

6.2.4 Policy, Governance, and Accountability

The participants also shared that most of the transformation initiatives are not strategic and/or genuine, but organisations are merely chasing compliance targets with limited accountability mechanisms. These findings confirm Mayer et al. (2019), who note that black professionals in South Africa face tokenistic inclusion, disguised as transformation, where diversity targets are pursued for compliance rather than genuine empowerment.

The observed symbolic appointments and male-intermediated promotions shared by the participants reinforce these dynamics, revealing how symbolic violence is institutionalised through formal and informal processes that sustain patriarchal authority. Furthermore, the findings revealed the absence of policy enforcement and monitoring which reflects a disconnect between South Africa's EEA objectives and corporate practice, a phenomenon that perpetuates symbolic violence under the guise of procedural fairness.

6.2.5 Conclusion: Research Question One Discussion

The findings related to research question one therefore validates and extend the literature by showing that symbolic violence operates simultaneously at structural, cultural, and psychological levels. It thrives in environments where compliance overshadows commitment, and where meritocracy is selectively defined by dominant actors.

In contrast, the two women in female-dominated sectors that the researcher interviewed reported fairer advancement systems, suggesting that when field dynamics shift to value diverse forms of capital such as skills, empathy and collaboration, symbolic violence diminishes.

6.3 Discussion: Research Question Two

How do relationships and skills interact to shape access to top management, and which is perceived to hold greater influence?

The findings indicate that relational capital, manifested through trust, sponsorship, and network visibility plays a greater role than technical skill in determining advancement to top management. This aligns with Scheepers et al. (2018) and Day et al. (2021) who identified sponsorship as a crucial, yet gendered, determinant of leadership mobility and the absence thereof as a key barrier to transformation and diversity in leadership. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the findings and related to research question two are discussed in this section.

6.3.1 Relational Capital as Symbolic Capital

Participants' descriptions of relationship-based advancement confirm that networks act as the currency of symbolic capital within the organisational field (Bourdieu, 1990). Those with established relationships, often men, accumulate symbolic capital that legitimises their authority.

Similarly, within Bourdieu's (1990) framework, relationships function as symbolic capital, bestowing legitimacy and influence. However, access to these relational resources is highly gendered. Male-dominated social spaces (golf clubs, informal gatherings) serve as exclusive sites of symbolic exchange, reproducing homosocial reproduction (Scheepers et al., 2018). Consequently, women's lack of access to these trust-building arenas limits their upward mobility regardless of skill or performance.

6.3.2 The Authenticity Paradox

While women who conform to dominant relational norms gain temporary acceptance, they often sacrifice authenticity, corroborating Ely et al.'s (2011) warning that overreliance on external validation distorts leadership identity. Conversely, women who develop relational capital through authenticity and shared purpose exhibit greater resilience, reinforcing the literature's call for identity-conscious leadership development that Day et al. (2021) advocates for.

6.3.3 Skills vs. Relationships

Although a minority of participants emphasised the primacy of skills, the broader pattern suggests that relationships outweigh technical skills in top leadership. There was one outlier who felt that relationships and skill are equally important and therefore must be synergised to achieve equitable advancement. However, because relational networks remain gendered, skill acquisition alone cannot guarantee progression. This insight extends Fitzsimmons & Callan's (2020) argument that leadership development must simultaneously build social capital and dismantle structural barriers that limit its distribution.

6.3.4 Conclusion: Research Question Two Discussion

The findings related to research question two strongly demonstrate that relational capital is both a facilitator and a gatekeeper of leadership advancement. It reflects the dual nature of symbolic violence: relationships can empower, but when embedded in exclusionary cultures, they entrench privilege. These dynamic underscores the need for formalised sponsorship structures that democratise access to relational resources.

This study extends existing literature by highlighting the gendered dynamics of relationship-building. While previous research (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020; Day et al., 2021) has emphasised mentorship and skill acquisition, this study demonstrates that informal relationships, often nurtured through male-dominated activities such as golf or socialising, operate as exclusionary mechanisms that restrict women's access to decision-makers. This reproduces homosocial reproduction, as described by

Scheepers et al. (2018), where individuals in power promote others who resemble themselves demographically and culturally.

Ely et al. (2011) argue that women's leadership development must involve the redefinition of leadership norms to include relational authenticity rather than conformity to masculine prototypes. The present findings confirm this necessity: women who build relationships through authentic, values-driven engagement rather than mimicry of male behaviour report stronger leadership identities and resilience against symbolic violence. Thus, the study expands on leadership development theory by showing how relational capital can be reframed as a tool for empowerment when detached from exclusionary practices.

6.4 Discussion: Research Question Three

How does lack of sponsorship hinder diversity and inclusion in top management?

The findings confirm that sponsorship is a critical determinant of career advancement, and the absence thereof perpetuates symbolic exclusion in executive pipelines, consistent with the arguments of Scheepers et al. (2018) and Day et al. (2021). Sponsorship, as distinct from mentorship, entails active advocacy and visibility creation, forms of symbolic capital that are critical in Bourdieu's framework.

In the South African private sector, sponsorship relationships are often formed through informal social networks dominated by men. This excludes women from crucial advocacy and visibility opportunities, reinforcing patterns of homosocial reproduction and sustaining symbolic violence.

This observation resonates with Bourdieu's (1998) view that symbolic capital such as recognition, legitimacy, and endorsement, is granted within established social hierarchies. Without sponsorship, women are denied access to this symbolic capital, which diminishes their perceived readiness for senior roles. Furthermore, the findings reveal that women who do obtain sponsorship often do so by conforming to dominant

norms, reflecting internalised symbolic violence. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the findings and related to research question three are discussed in this section.

6.4.1 Sponsorship and the Bourdieusian Field

In the organisational field, sponsorship functions as the mechanism through which symbolic capital is exchanged and recognised. Those with sponsorship gain legitimacy; those without remain invisible. The gendered nature of these exchanges sustains inequality, as male leaders tend to sponsor protégés who mirror their own identities, a manifestation of homophily and symbolic reproduction (Scheepers et al., 2018).

6.4.2 Structural Embeddedness of Sponsorship Deficits

The lack of sponsorship is not merely an interpersonal issue but a systemic one. It is embedded within organisational cultures that equate trustworthiness with sameness and competence with masculinity (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). Consequently, women's exclusion from informal advocacy channels limits their accumulation of symbolic capital and perpetuates structural stagnation.

6.4.3 Transformative Sponsorship Practices

The findings also point to potential disruptors. Women who intentionally cultivate authentic relationships and demonstrate high competence can gradually reconfigure organisational perceptions of leadership legitimacy. When organisations implement structured, transparent sponsorship programs, anchored in accountability and equity, they can transform relational power from an exclusionary to an empowering mechanism.

6.3.4 Conclusion: Research Question Three Discussion

The findings affirm that sponsorship represents a critical yet often inaccessible form of symbolic capital in organisational hierarchies. Consistent with the arguments of Ely et al. (2011), Scheepers et al. (2018), and Day et al. (2021), women's progression into

senior and executive roles requires not only mentorship but active advocacy and endorsement within organisational structures. While mentorship provides psychosocial support and developmental guidance, sponsorship extends beyond advice, it entails strategic advocacy that enhances visibility, legitimacy, and access to power.

This study demonstrates that the absence of sponsorship perpetuates structural inequality even in organisations that formally promote diversity and inclusion. Sponsorship deficits are not simply the outcome of individual bias or oversight but are structurally embedded within organisational cultures that privilege familiarity, homogeneity, and masculine-coded behaviours as proxies for trust and leadership readiness. These dynamics reinforce Bourdieu's (1990) notion of symbolic violence, where social hierarchies are maintained through the subtle legitimisation of unequal access to capital.

The data also reveal that women who manage to secure sponsorship often do so by conforming to dominant cultural norms, adopting behavioural and stylistic attributes that align with the masculine habitus of leadership. Such conformity, while occasionally yielding short-term gains, simultaneously reproduces the symbolic order that marginalises women, illustrating the internalisation of symbolic violence. Consequently, sponsorship becomes both an enabler and a gatekeeper of advancement, offering opportunities for some while reinforcing exclusion for others.

6.5 Chapter Conclusion

The discussion demonstrates that symbolic violence, as articulated by Bourdieu, provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding persistent gender inequality in leadership. The findings affirm that systemic barriers, relational exclusion, and sponsorship deficits intersect to perpetuate patterns of domination and conformity. While the study corroborates much of the existing literature, it extends theoretical insight by contextualising symbolic violence within South Africa's private sector, where

legislative progress under the Employment Equity Act has not translated into substantive equality.

By linking empirical evidence to the theoretical foundations laid in Chapters 1 and 2, this study advances three key insights:

1. Symbolic violence as a systemic continuum: Symbolic violence operates across all organisational layers, from structural exclusion to interpersonal validation. It is legitimised by the habitus of both the oppressor and the oppressed, leading women to internalise subordination as natural.
2. Capital inequality in the organisational field: The dominant field privileges social and symbolic capital (relationships, sponsorship, and visibility) over human capital (skills and education), undermining formal meritocracy and sustaining gendered hierarchies.
3. Intersectionality and contextual specificity: In South Africa, symbolic violence is intensified by the intersection of race, gender, and class (Nkomo, 2021; Holvino, 2010). Transformation requires acknowledging these layered oppressions and dismantling the institutionalised structures that reproduce them.

The findings also indicate transformative potential. When sponsorship is institutionalised through transparent, equity-driven frameworks, anchored in accountability, diversity targets, and leadership training, it can disrupt entrenched patterns of privilege. Authentic sponsorship, grounded in merit, competence, and inclusive leadership values, enables women to accumulate symbolic capital without compromising authenticity. This reframing positions sponsorship as a mechanism of empowerment rather than subordination, advancing the broader goals of inclusion and organisational transformation.

This study extends prior literature by situating sponsorship within a Bourdieusian field of power, highlighting how it mediates access to symbolic capital and perpetuates gendered hierarchies. The analysis underscores that equitable transformation in the South African private sector demands not only the expansion of sponsorship opportunities but the reconstruction of the organisational habitus itself, shifting from relational exclusivity to transparent, merit-based advocacy that genuinely supports women's leadership advancement.

Overall, this chapter demonstrated that women's limited advancement to top management in South Africa's private sector is neither accidental nor solely behavioural but structurally embedded and culturally legitimised through symbolic violence. The interplay of systemic exclusion, relational gatekeeping, and sponsorship deficits sustains gender inequality despite the existence of progressive legislative frameworks such as the EEA.

By synthesising Bourdieu's theoretical constructs with leadership development theory, this study provides a multidimensional understanding of how inequality is reproduced and, importantly, how it might be disrupted through authentic, inclusive, and equity-driven leadership practices. The following chapter will synthesise these findings to offer strategic recommendations for leadership development, diversity management, and organisational policy reform.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

As established in Chapter One, achieving substantive diversity and inclusion within top management structures remains an enduring global and organisational challenge (Sims et al., 2019). Chidambaran et al. (2022) reported that women constitute only approximately 12% of executive leaders, a statistic that underscores the persistent gender imbalance in corporate leadership. Within the South African context, although sector-specific equity targets have been articulated through the Employment Equity Act (EEA), progress among private sector organisations remains considerably inadequate (Employment Law Alliance, 2023).

Scholars such as Fitzsimmons and Callan (2020), Scheepers et al. (2018), and Owusu-Kwarteng et al. (2025) highlighted the multifaceted barriers to diversity and inclusion, attributing them to entrenched cultural, social, and structural impediments, as elaborated in Chapter Two. This study addressed the central research problem, namely: Symbolic Violence as an Inhibiting Factor to Women's Career Advancement among Middle and Senior Managers. The concept of symbolic violence, as defined by Bourdieu (1990), refers to the subtle, often imperceptible mechanisms of power that legitimise inequality and reproduce systemic exclusion and domination within organisational contexts.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1990) relational framework of field, capital, and habitus, the study revealed that symbolic violence operates through subtle organisational norms, internalised hierarchies, and gendered expectations that constrain women's access to leadership capital. It also utilised the relational model of inequality (Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2010) to unpack how power and privilege are reproduced through relational dynamics at macro (policy), meso (organisational), and micro (individual) levels.

The primary objective of this study was to explore the manifestations of symbolic violence within the South African private sector, with specific emphasis on its

implications for women leaders' progression, organisational culture, and inclusion practices. The study was guided by three research questions, which were derived from the existing body of literature discussed in Chapter 2:

Research Question 1: How does symbolic violence constrain women's progression into senior management and executive positions within large organisations?

Research Question 2: In what ways do interpersonal relationships and professional competencies interact to shape access to top management roles, and which of these factors is perceived to exert greater influence?

Research Question 3: How does the absence of sponsorship mechanisms impede diversity and inclusion efforts in executive leadership?

The research methodology was systematically detailed in Chapter Four. Given the descriptive and explanatory orientation of the study, an interpretivist philosophical approach was adopted. As Saunders and Lewis (2018) assert, interpretivism "relates to the study of social phenomena within their natural settings" (p. 109), allowing for a nuanced understanding of human experiences and social realities. This epistemological stance aligns with Goldkuhl (2012), who identified interpretivism as one of the predominant paradigms in qualitative research, particularly suited to examining socially constructed meanings and interests. Similar approaches have been employed in related studies exploring gendered organisational dynamics and symbolic forms of exclusion, thereby affirming the methodological relevance and theoretical robustness of this study's design.

The composition and demographic characteristics of the research sample were detailed in Chapter Five. The qualitative data were systematically analysed using Atlas.ti, which enabled an in-depth examination of patterns, relationships, and meanings embedded within the participants' narratives. Through this analytical process, five overarching themes emerged, each encapsulating critical challenges that hinder women's career progression in the South African private sector. These themes encompassed structural barriers, implicit and institutionalised biases, systemic organisational dynamics, and deficiencies in governance, policy enforcement, and

accountability structures. Collectively, these factors illustrate the pervasive and multifaceted nature of the constraints affecting women's advancement into senior leadership positions.

The empirical findings, as presented in Chapter Five, reflected authentic experiences and perceptions shared by the study participants, offering valuable insights into the subtle mechanisms of symbolic violence that perpetuate inequality. These findings were subsequently interpreted and critically discussed in Chapter Six, where they were contextualised within existing theoretical frameworks and prior empirical studies. This synthesis not only reinforced the relevance of the study's conceptual foundation but also illuminated the complex interplay between individual agency and organisational culture in shaping gendered career trajectories.

The summary of the key findings are presented in section 7.2, providing a synthesis of key insights emerging from the empirical analysis, contextualised within the theoretical and legislative frameworks discussed in earlier chapters. This chapter also presents evidence-based recommendations targeted at multiple stakeholders such as government institutions, corporate organisations and individual actors. These recommendations aim to address and disrupt the systemic and cultural barriers that perpetuate symbolic violence in the South African private sector by promoting structural, cultural, and behavioural transformation.

7.2 Summary of Key Findings

The findings confirm that symbolic violence remains a significant yet under-recognised mechanism through which women's career progression is inhibited in corporate South Africa. Despite the Employment Equity Act (EEA) and related transformation policies, progress toward gender equity in leadership remains slow and inconsistent. Five core themes emerged from the research questions.

7.2.1 Symbolic Violence and Structural Barriers

The first research question examined how symbolic violence inhibits women from advancing into top management or executive roles. The study found that organisational cultures in male-dominated sectors continue to privilege masculine norms of authority, assertiveness, and competitiveness. Women, particularly women of colour, must often modify their behaviours to align with these norms, sacrificing authenticity and confidence. Structural issues such as opaque promotion processes, inadequate succession planning, and tokenistic diversity efforts reinforce these dynamics. Conversely, female-dominated environments demonstrate more equitable advancement processes grounded in skill, merit, and collaboration.

7.2.2 The Interplay between Relationships and Skills

The second research question explored how relationships and skills interact to shape leadership access. Findings revealed that while technical competence is essential, social capital, cultivated through relationships, visibility, and trust plays a more decisive role in determining who advances to top management. Women's limited participation in informal networks, such as golf outings and executive social circles, restricts their access to influential sponsors and decision-makers. This relational exclusion reproduces symbolic violence by reinforcing power hierarchies under the guise of "cultural fit."

7.2.3 Sponsorship, Mentorship, and Inclusion

The third research question investigated how a lack of sponsorship hinders diversity and inclusion. Participants highlighted that mentorship and sponsorship, key enablers of leadership development, remain largely inaccessible to women. Where such programmes exist, they are often informal, inconsistent, or driven by compliance rather than commitment. The absence of visible, supportive female mentors further compounds these challenges, as women often experience isolation and self-doubt in navigating leadership pathways.

7.2.4 Institutional Accountability and Policy Enforcement

A strong theme across all findings was the perceived ineffectiveness of transformation oversight. Participants called for greater accountability from the Department of Employment and Labour (DoEL) and the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) in enforcing equity compliance. Many participants expressed frustration with symbolic or “tick-box” approaches to diversity, arguing that government monitoring must extend beyond annual reports to active engagement with employees and audits of equity practices.

7.3 Recommendations

The recommendations presented in this chapter are derived from a synthesis of empirical findings, theoretical insights, and critical reflections emerging from the study. While a portion of these recommendations are informed by the researcher’s professional experience and contextual understanding, the majority originate from the perspectives articulated by participants and the integration of relevant theoretical constructs identified through the literature.

Collectively, these recommendations seek to translate the study’s key findings into actionable strategies that may inform organizational practice, enhance leadership effectiveness, and contribute to the broader discourse within the field of management and organizational development.

7.3.1 Policy and Governmental Interventions

The following interventions must be implemented from a policy and governmental level.

a) **Strengthen Enforcement of Employment Equity Legislation:**

The DoEL and DMRE must adopt a proactive enforcement stance including regular workplace inspections, Section 54 compliance orders, and penalties for non-compliance.

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: “First, government departments like the Department of Employment and Labour (DoEL) and the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) need to take a stronger stance. They should be stricter in enforcing transformation laws and issue

more Section 54s (compliance orders) when companies fail to meet equity standards.”

“They should visit workplaces more often, talk to employees directly, and review employment records to see who’s been stuck in the same position for years despite having the right qualifications. I’ve seen young women with technical trades like diesel mechanics or electricians who never get opportunities for in-service training. When positions open, they’re simply overlooked.”

b) Partnerships for Leadership Development:

Government departments should collaborate with industry bodies to create national mentorship programmes for women in technical and strategic sectors.

P14 – African male in senior management, aged between 35-44: “Women need to be given separate leadership advancement opportunities with proper mentoring.”

P 10 – White lady in top management, aged between 45-54: “Mentorship is crucial and helped me, from both women and men, it played a vital role in my progression. I was given space to learn, fail, and grow without fear of judgment.”

P2 - African lady in Top management, aged between 45-54: “Organisations must act upon their Employment Equity targets. They must ensure that all employees have access to mentors and that succession planning is implemented and employees are upskilled and prepared for growth and promotions.”

c) Shift from Quantitative to Qualitative Transformation:

Compliance should include qualitative measures such as inclusivity, leadership authenticity, and workplace culture assessments.

P6 - African lady in middle management, aged between 45-54: “Companies need to be held accountable, not just allowed to tick boxes.”

d) Transparent Reporting Mechanisms:

Corporates should be mandated to publish annual transformation reports detailing gender representation, leadership investments, and progression rates.

7.3.2 Organisational-Level Interventions

Organisations must adopt a more intentional, transparent, and authentic approach to their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies. The following interventions are proposed as mechanisms to foster sustainable and meaningful progress:

a) Cultural Transformation and Psychological Safety:

Appointing women leaders who are resolute and purpose-driven in addressing gender bias is crucial for cultivating environments that prioritise psychological safety and inclusivity. Organisations should conduct comprehensive inclusivity audits, implement ongoing bias-awareness and accountability training, and establish structured spaces for open, respectful dialogue. These measures can strengthen trust, promote equitable participation, and embed diversity and inclusion as core elements of organisational culture.

P7 - African lady in middle management, aged between 35-44: “Companies need to be more intentional about dismantling gender stereotypes.”

b) Authentic Leadership Development:

Focus on building confidence and authentic leadership rather than masculine conformity.

P9 - Indian lady in senior management, aged between 25-34: “Have more female leaders who care about other females. not females who get to top management and decide to behave exactly like their male counterparts. insensitive and unkind.”

c) Institutional Accountability:

Diversity goals must form part of leadership KPIs; executives should be evaluated on measurable progress.

d) Transparent Succession and Promotion Processes:

Establish competency-based promotion frameworks communicated to all employees.

P2 - African lady in Top management, aged between 45-54: “Organisations must act upon their Employment Equity targets. They must ensure that all employees have access to mentors and that succession planning is implemented and employees are upskilled and prepared for growth and promotions.”

P4 - African lady in middle management, aged between 25-34: “Management must have more transparency in the promotion processes and better communication from top management about expectations and selection criteria.”

e) Mentorship and Sponsorship Programmes:

Institutionalise structured mentorship pairing emerging women leaders with executives.

P 10 – White lady in top management, aged between 45-54: “Women must support and empower one another. In my previous environment, female leaders often hindered other women’s progress due to competitiveness or favouritism. I encourage honesty, collaboration, and mentorship among women. As Brené Brown says, embracing vulnerability and authenticity is key to leadership and growth.”

“Mentorship is crucial and helped me, from both women and men, it played a vital role in my progression. I was given space to learn, fail, and grow without fear of judgment.”

7.3.3 Individual and Collective Empowerment

Finally, women leaders as individuals must also be more intentional about supporting, encouraging and advocating for each other.

- a) Women Supporting Women: Foster mentorship and collaboration among female leaders to disrupt competitive isolation.
- b) Confidence and Visibility: Encourage self-advocacy and executive presence for women seeking senior roles.
- c) Networking and Alliances: Strengthen women’s professional networks across sectors for shared learning and advocacy.

7.4 Integration with Theoretical and Empirical Insights

By integrating Bourdieu's Bourdieusian framework with the relational model of inequality, this study demonstrated that leadership access is neither meritocratic nor gender-neutral. Symbolic violence functions through the reproduction of organisational habitus that privileges dominant male dispositions and excludes others as "unfit." The empirical evidence confirmed that symbolic violence operates across macro, meso, and micro levels, requiring multi-level interventions aligning government, organisations, and individuals.

7.5 Implications for Practice and Future Research

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions to understanding how symbolic violence perpetuates gender inequality within leadership contexts. From a practical standpoint, the findings underscore that genuine gender equity necessitates a profound cultural transformation anchored in authenticity, inclusivity, and systemic reflection. As emphasised by Luanglath et al. (2019), a diverse Top Management Team (TMT) constitutes not merely a moral imperative but also a strategic asset, enhancing organisational problem-solving capacities, fostering innovation, deepening market insight, and stimulating creativity.

Future research should extend these insights by examining the intersectionality of gender with other social identities across different industrial sectors. This will assess the longitudinal impact of sponsorship and mentorship initiatives and developing integrative assessment models that combine qualitative indicators of cultural transformation with quantitative measures of equity. Additionally, the dynamics of collaboration between organisations and the Department of Employment and Labour warrant further investigation, particularly in relation to advancing equitable diversity and inclusion progress and raising awareness of symbolic violence in workplace cultures.

7.6 Conclusion

Overall, this study strengthens the theoretical claim that symbolic violence in organisations is reproduced through everyday practices, interpersonal relations, and implicit rules of belonging. It extends existing literature by empirically linking these mechanisms to leadership development processes in the South African private sector, where the intersection of race, gender, and class intensifies the experience of exclusion.

The study concludes that symbolic violence remains a pervasive barrier to women's advancement in South Africa's corporate landscape. This is aligned to Fitzsimmons & Callan, (2020) who emphasised that symbolic violence is a subtle and global challenge that is systematically imposed to the marginalised group to disadvantage them from progressing to top management. Despite progressive legislation, patriarchal norms continue to shape perceptions of leadership legitimacy and restrict access to power. Achieving authentic transformation requires institutional accountability and individual empowerment. Organisations must move beyond compliance to embrace transformation as a strategic and ethical imperative. The DoEL and DMRE have a pivotal role in enforcing equitable practices.

The findings further indicate that symbolic violence is most prevalent within male-dominated sectors, where power dynamics and cultural norms tend to reinforce gender hierarchies. In contrast, sectors with a more balanced representation of men and women place greater emphasis on individuals' capabilities, skills, and qualifications. Moreover, these gender-inclusive sectors demonstrate a stronger commitment to fairness and a more genuine appreciation of authentic leadership qualities.

Organizations may experience significant limitations in their strategic and operational effectiveness in the absence of diversity within the Top Management Team (TMT). A homogenous TMT constrains the breadth of perspectives and experiences brought to the decision-making process, thereby diminishing the organization's capacity for innovation, creativity, and comprehensive problem-solving as demonstrated by

Luanglath et al. (2019). Such uniformity often fosters groupthink, where critical reflection and constructive dissent are suppressed, leading to suboptimal strategic outcomes.

Furthermore, the lack of gender and cultural diversity within leadership may result in a diminished understanding of heterogeneous customer bases, particularly in markets where consumer preferences are influenced by diverse social and demographic factors. Consequently, organizations with less diverse TMTs may struggle to align their strategic initiatives with the evolving needs of global markets, reducing their competitive agility and long-term sustainability. Therefore, the absence of diversity at the highest levels of management not only limits organizational learning and adaptability but also undermines the firm's potential to achieve sustained competitive advantage in an increasingly complex and dynamic business environment.

By implementing the recommendations highlighted above, corporate South Africa can build inclusive leadership cultures where diversity, authenticity, and fairness drive sustainable growth and innovation.

7.3. Limitations

A significant limitation of this study was the limited availability of recent and high-quality theoretical literature explicitly addressing symbolic violence in relation to diversity and inclusion within the South African context. The scarcity of such scholarly work presented challenges in establishing a stronger theoretical foundation for the research.

Furthermore, severe time constraints posed an additional limitation. Balancing demanding professional responsibilities, domestic obligations, academic commitments, and participation in both individual and group assignments, including the global module, restricted the time available for extensive reading, critical analysis, and synthesis of the literature necessary to further strengthen this project.

Lastly, limited access to policymakers constrained the depth of the study. Despite efforts to engage with the developers and custodians of the Employment Equity Act (EEA) to obtain their insights and perspectives, these attempts were not successful, thereby limiting the inclusion of valuable policy-level viewpoints.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Thematic Summary and participants' evidence

Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence (Illustrative Quotes/Patterns)	Observed Impact
Structural & Systemic Barriers	Lack of Transparency in Career Progression	"Lack of transparency in promotion and selection criteria as a subtle barrier to women's advancement. Two executives were recently appointed in my organisation, but the positions were not advertised."	Distrust and disengagement
	Limited Opportunities & Overlooked Promotion	"The mining sector is very hard for women. You really have to develop a thick skin if you are a woman, particularly African women, because you struggle, a lot. It is so painful to see how our African males drag the women down as they progress in their careers."	Feelings of stagnation and frustration
	Poor Succession Planning & Gendered Appointments	"Poor mentorship programmes and the lack of succession planning." "There is lack of transparency in promotions and selection criteria. There are no mentors, even when women are promoted, they are always filtered through a male intermediary, preventing them from directly reporting to senior management."	Tokenism undermines confidence in initiatives

Social & Cultural Barriers	Gender & Racial Bias	"In many instances I was told that I was not the right colour for the job despite being duly qualified and experienced." "Strong women in industry are often seen as unfriendly and aggressive. If a male had to behave in the same way as strong female, he would not be judged as harshly as she would be."	Intersectional barriers limit opportunities
	Social Exclusion & Informal Networks	"The big conversations happen on the golf course, and we're not invited." "Senior male managers often leave work early to play golf, and important discussions happen there. Only senior management is invited, mostly men." "There's boys clubs that exist in corporate and often women are filtered through a male leader before being considered for a Top Management role."	Restricted access to mentorship and sponsorship
	Subtle Biases & Forced Conformity	"When I speak my mind, I'm aggressive; when quiet, I'm weak." "Speaking out or challenging norms carries reputational risk for women." "In this industry, for a woman to succeed, she has to develop a thick skin and, in many ways, act like men." "Women are often told how to answer questions. I am often pressured to adapt my leadership style to be more palatable, advised to attribute pressure to top management rather than myself to avoid being perceived as rude or aggressive."	Eroded confidence and reduced visibility

Developmental & Leadership Barriers	Lack of Mentorship & Guidance	"There was no one to show me how to navigate the politics at the top."	Limited leadership pipeline development
	Ineffective Initiatives & Denied Support	"The programs exist on paper, but don't actually help women move forward."	Skepticism toward diversity agendas
	Unrealistic Expectations & Leadership Style Pressures	"We are expected to prove ourselves twice over before being considered."	Burnout and disengagement
Organisational Culture & Norms	Relationships and Trust	"Relationships are more important than skills for top management advancement. You need a sponsor that will mention your name in certain rooms. There's a perception that skills can be taught."	Conformity demands suppress diverse leadership styles and incentivize assimilation.
	Organisational Culture & Norms	"Men feel inferior when a woman is more qualified, like a female geologist or engineer. It threatens their sense of authority, and as a result, some even resort to sabotaging women's work. This industry can be very difficult in that sense." "There's a culture here where if you're quiet and agreeable, a "yes-person", you get along fine. But if you question things or challenge decisions, you're labelled a troublemaker."	Denied access to top leadership advancements.
	Psychological Safety <i>Add more different views</i>	"Questions and/or different views were interpreted as insubordination. There was an instant where I asked questions and I was told that I should not ask because it will be seen as insubordination" "When I questioned it, they accused me of being against her. But my concern was about fairness and protecting women from being tokenism or set up for failure."	Fear of reprisal discourages open dialogue and limits innovation

Governance, Policy & Accountability	Accountability & Policy Implementation	“Companies often argue that they don’t want to set a precedent, meaning they know they’re wrong but don’t want to admit it, because that would require them to treat others fairly in the future.” “Skills are more important than relationships for Top Management. It is important that employees are able to deliver on their mandate and can be held accountable for their performance. I believe relationships are secondary.” “I don’t even entertain certain jokes, because many of them cross the line into harassment. I tell my male colleagues to stop immediately. What they think is harmless banter can be degrading”	Weak policy enforcement allows biased practices to persist; lack of accountability undermines reforms.
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Appendix 2: Codes emerging from the data

Codes	
Accountability	Compliance issues
Accountability: Accountability in governance	Conformity Expectations
Accountability: Critique of management practices	Constructive feedback
Accountability: Critique of systems	Corporate culture
Accountability: Desire for transparency	Cultural dynamics
Accountability: Principles	Development Opportunities and Misinterpretation
Accountability: Questioning authority	Development Programmes
Accountability: Questioning authority	Discrimination
Accountability: Respect for competence	Discrimination: Barriers to advancement
Adapting Leadership Style	Discrimination: Racial discrimination
Advocacy	Diversity
Authenticity	Empathy
Authenticity Conflict	Empowerment
Barriers to advancement	Equality: Meritocracy
Barriers to participation	Ethics
Behavioural Norms for Women	Exclusion
Bias	Expectations
Boundaries	Fairness
Career advancement	Filtered Promotions
Career aspirations	Frustration
Career barriers	Gender and Race
Career barriers: Career progression barriers	Gender bias
Career barriers: Gender barriers	Gender discrimination
Career barriers: Inclusion challenges	Gender disparity
Career barriers: Motherhood penalty	Gender dynamics
Career challenges: Career limitations	Gender dynamics: Influence of networks
Career Development	Gender dynamics: Adoption of behaviours
Career development: Survival strategies	Gender dynamics: Cultural shift
Career dynamics: Assertiveness	Gender dynamics: Gender influence
Career dynamics: Career development concerns	Gender dynamics: Gender stereotypes
Career dynamics: Concern for development	Gender equality
Career dynamics: Discomfort in communication	Gender equity: Activism
Career dynamics: Ineffective communication	Gender equity: Advocacy for policy change
Career dynamics: Influence	Gender equity: Concerns about fairness
Career dynamics: Interpersonal conflict	Gender equity: Education Access
Career dynamics: Interpersonal relationships	Gender equity: Gender barriers
Career dynamics: Lack of initiative	Gender equity: Gender biases
Career dynamics: Power struggles	Gender equity: Gender discrimination
Career dynamics: Professional challenges	Gender equity: Gender disparity
Career dynamics: Professional relationships	Gender equity: Gender Inclusivity
Career dynamics: Promotion dynamics	Gender equity: Gender Inequality
Career impediments: Promotion barriers	Gender equity: Gender representation
Career impediments: Workplace constraints	Gender equity: Influence of gender
Career progression	Gender equity: Patriarchy

Codes	
Challenges	Gender equity: Women's issues
Change over time	Gender exclusion
Collaboration	Gender inequality
Communication	Gender inequality: Barriers to advancement
Communication barriers	Gender inequality: Gender bias
Gender inequality: Gender exclusion	Gender inequality: Gender equality
Gender inequality: Gender inequality	Leadership development: Skills development
Gender inequality: Gender norms	Leadership development: Work-life balance
Gender Influence on Career Progression	Leadership dynamics: Leadership pressure
Gender Issues	Leadership dynamics: Leadership stereotypes
Gender norms	Leadership Engagement: Participation and engagement
Gender norms: Expectations of women	Leadership norms
Gender norms: Informal norms	Leadership pressure
Gender norms: Negative perception of self	Leadership Reporting
Gender roles	Leadership Style
Gender stereotypes	Legal challenges
Genuine Efforts for Women's Promotion	Mentorship
Genuineness: Authenticity	Mentorship issues
Historical perspective	Misalignment of values"
Importance of Relationships for Advancement	Misinterpreted Views
Inconsistency: Double standards	Networking
Inequality	Observed Barriers
Influence	Open dialogue
Influenced Decisions	Organisational Culture and Inclusivity
Injustice: Arbitration	Organizational change
Injustice: Disillusionment	Organizational culture
Injustice: Harassment	Organizational effectiveness
Injustice: Lack of Transparency	Performance orientation
Injustice: Rejection	Perseverance
Injustice: Sabotage	Personal growth
Institutional bias	Power dynamics
Integrity	Pressure to conform
Intentionality	Privilege
Language barrier	Problem-solving
Leadership	Professional development
Leadership barriers	Professional Development: Mentorship
Leadership challenges	Professional Development: Qualifications
Leadership critique: Critique of leadership styles	Professional Development: Relationship management
Leadership critique: Recommendations for equity	Professional Development: Skills
Leadership development	Professional expectations

Codes	
Leadership development (2): Leadership identity	Systemic barriers: Stereotypes
Leadership development: Leadership challenges	Systemic barriers: Systemic racism
Leadership development: Leadership development	Systemic barriers: Underrepresentation
Leadership development: Leadership expectations	Transparency
Leadership development: Organisational culture	Trust
Racial injustice: Microaggressions	Professional limitations
Racial injustice: Racial bias	Promotion Overlooked Due to Social Capital
Racial injustice: Racism	Proving Competence
Recommendations for change	Racial bias
Recommendations for Reducing Barriers	Racial injustice: Discrimination
Reflection	Unspoken Expectations and Norms
Relationship building	Upskilling
Relationship perspective	Value of skills
Representation	Values
Reputational risk	Values alignment"
Resilience	Vulnerability
Self-acceptance	Work-life balance
Self-worth	Workplace culture
Skepticism	Workplace culture: Emotional labour
Skill development	Workplace culture: Informal networks
Social barriers	Workplace culture: Work culture
Social Capital Impact	Workplace culture: Workplace challenges
Social dynamics	Workplace culture: Workplace dynamics
Social exclusion	Workplace culture: Workplace environment
Social justice	Workplace culture: Workplace inequality
Social responsibility	Workplace discrimination
Societal pressure	Workplace dynamics
Stereotyping	Workplace equity: Compromise
Subtle Barriers to Women's Advancement	Workplace equity: Equity in the workplace
Subtle Biases	Workplace equity: Promotion barriers
Subtle Biases and Leadership Visibility	Workplace equity: Respect for differing views
Succession planning	Workplace equity: Toxic workplace
Systemic barriers: Ageism	Workplace equity: Valued opinions
Systemic barriers: Barriers to equity	Workplace equity: Workplace equality
Systemic barriers: Education and qualifications	Workplace inequality
Systemic barriers: Emotional resilience	
Systemic barriers: Insecurity	
Systemic barriers: Lack of authenticity	
Systemic barriers: Need for inclusivity	
Systemic barriers: Recognition	