Gordon Institute of Business Science
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Exploring the Influence of Organisational Culture on Women's Perceptions of Gender Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives in the Manufacturing Sector

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ABSTRACT

Women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles within male dominated industries like the South African manufacturing sector, despite decades of corporate commitments to gender diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Simionescu, Gherghina, Tawil, & Sheika, 2021). Research shows that at the current pace of change, it may take over a century to achieve gender parity in managerial positions (United Nations, 2023). This study critically examines how organisational culture shapes women's perceptions of DEI initiatives, employing Schein's Model of Organisational Culture as a theoretical framework (Schein, 2010). Specifically, it investigates how cultural artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions influence workplace experiences, career progression, and retention of women.

Through a qualitative, interpretive research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with women leaders across multiple manufacturing organisations. Thematic analysis revealed persistent structural and cultural barriers, including exclusion from informal power networks, gendered leadership biases, and performative DEI strategies that fail to drive substantive change. Findings suggest that while many organisations have formal DEI policies, their effectiveness is undermined by entrenched cultural norms that reinforce male-dominated hierarchies. Women reported scepticism regarding the authenticity of these initiatives, often perceiving them as compliance-driven rather than transformative. Furthermore, the study highlights the critical role of leadership accountability, mentorship, and the establishment of psychologically safe work environments. The study provides evidence that meaningful gender diversity cannot be achieved through policy alone but requires cultural transformation at all levels of the organisation.

This research contributes to both academic and industrial discussions on workplace diversity by offering practical recommendations for manufacturing organisations to bridge the gap between DEI rhetoric and lived reality. By challenging deeply ingrained cultural biases and reshaping leadership structures, organisations can create environments where women are not only present in leadership but also able to thrive.

Key Words: Organisational Culture; Gender Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Artefacts; Espoused Values; Underlying Assumptions

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 to the Research Problem

1.1 Background

The persistence of gender disparities within organisations remains a pressing issue, despite numerous initiatives aimed at fostering equality (United Nations, 2023). This research seeks to address the complexities surrounding gender diversity by investigating the role of organisational culture, specifically through the application of Schein's (2010) Model of Organisational Culture. The objective is to understand how the various levels of culture artefacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions contribute to gender diversity within organisations, with a focus on perceived organisational culture and how it is experienced by women in the workplace.

Despite the proliferation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in organisations, these efforts have largely fallen short of effectively addressing the gender gap within various organisations such as those in the manufacturing sector, particularly concerning the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Ely and Meyerson (2000) argue that DEI initiatives do very little to address the organisational culture as the foundational cause of the gender gap in organisations. This research aims to explore these initiatives by exploring the perceptions of women within the industry. By examining whether these initiatives are viewed as genuine efforts towards gender equity, or merely superficial measures, this study seeks to understand whether current DEI strategies align with the actual needs and aspirations of women in the workplace.

Schein’s Model provides a comprehensive framework for analysing organisational culture by examining the visible, stated, and deeply embedded elements that shape behaviour within organisations (Hogan & Coote, 2014). This model is particularly relevant for exploring gender diversity, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of how cultural norms and values influence the inclusion or exclusion of diverse groups (Hogan & Coote, 2014). By applying this framework, the research aimed to uncover the subtle and often unconscious cultural factors that contribute to gender inequality.

To achieve this, a qualitative research methodology was followed, with semi-structured interviews as the primary method of inquiry. Data was collected through

semi-structured interviews and was analysed using an interpretive approach, enabling a detailed examination of women's experience of cultural dynamics within their organisations. This process contextualized insights into how gender diversity initiatives are perceived in relation to the different levels of organisational culture.

This research report is structured as follows: First, the literature review provides a comprehensive examination of the theoretical foundations and existing scholarly discourse on gender diversity and organisational culture. This section contextualises the study by engaging with relevant theories and empirical studies that inform the research problem. Subsequently, the research questions guiding this investigation are articulated, establishing the study's scope and objectives. The research design and methodology chapter delineates the qualitative research approach employed, including the data collection and analysis methods, to ensure methodological rigour and reliability. The subsequent chapters present and critically discuss the research findings, introducing a conceptual framework that offers insights into how women perceive DEI initiatives within the context of organisational culture. This framework aims to assist organisations in identifying factors that foster inclusivity while highlighting possible areas requiring improvement. The final chapter presents the conclusion, synthesising key findings and reflecting on their implications for organisational practice.

This research seeks to contribute to the understanding of gender diversity within organisations by highlighting the critical role of organisational culture. By using Schein's Model as the analytical framework, the study aims to offer practical insights for fostering more inclusive workplace environments.

1.2 Research Problem

1.2.1 Macro Context

The United Nation's (UN) sustainable development goal 5.5.2 (SDG 5.5.2) aims to achieve gender equality in different industries through the increased proportion of women in managerial positions in the workplace (United Nations, 2023). The UN further posits that at the current rate of change across the various industries, it will take 140 years to achieve equal representation in leadership in the workplace

(United Nations, 2023). This stark projection highlights the necessity for immediate and transformative actions to accelerate progress toward gender parity.

The South African manufacturing industry's role as a labour absorptive industry plays a crucial role in the achievement of the UN SDG 5.5.2. Statistics South Africa's (Stats SA) Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) (2023) shows that the industry has not done enough to address the gender diversity. The analysis of the Stats SA QLFS (2023) shows that the female workforce participation rate in manufacturing was 34.7% and the male participation rate was at 65.3%. The World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report (2024) explains that entry of women into manufacturing is at 46%, however, this does not translate to the senior positions as women only make up approximately 24%. The industry is male dominated across all positions, however women are catching up with men in terms of entry into the industry, although this is not translating to progression into more senior roles in manufacturing organisations (WEF, 2024). Despite these alarming differences Stats SA QLFS (2023) shows that there was a 3.3% turnover rate in the total number of women employed in the manufacturing industry. These statistics show that the industry is experiencing a major gender diversity gap, and with the turnover, women continue to be underrepresented in the South African manufacturing industry, and in management positions.

Simionescu, Gherghina, Tawil and Sheikha (2021) explain that various literature on agency theory is available that shows that gender diversity in management is crucial for a broader perspective in the boardroom, helps foster the promotion of equal opportunities across all genders in the workplace and improves overall organisational performance. The lack of gender diversity in the boardroom can perpetuate gender biases that stifle the career development of women in organisations (Naima, 2016). Leadership and organisational culture play a vital role in the determination of an organisation's structural approach to gender diversity and consequently the retention of women in organisations (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020).

In light of these findings, it is imperative for stakeholders in the South African manufacturing industry and indeed all other sectors strive to adopt robust strategies aimed at bridging the gender gap. This includes implementing policies that support the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women, fostering an inclusive culture

that values diverse perspectives, and actively dismantles systemic barriers that perpetuate gender inequities. Achieving gender parity in managerial positions is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for enhancing organisational effectiveness and driving sustainable development as required by the UN SDG 5.5.2. Promoting gender diversity extends beyond merely adhering to international and national mandates; it encompasses the strategic utilization of the entire workforce's potential to foster innovation, enhance decision-making processes, and secure long-term sustainability (Reguera-Alvarado & Bravo-Urquiza, 2020). By committing to gender equality, businesses can cultivate more equitable and prosperous work environments, thereby contributing to the advancement of a more just and balanced society which aligned to the UN SDG 5.5.2 (Reguera-Alvarado & Bravo-Urquiza, 2020).

In a seminal work by Gherardi (1994) the effectiveness of gender diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives was critically analysed within organisational settings. Seminal works such as Gherardi (1994) provide a foundational understanding of how gender is constructed and enacted within organisational cultures, offering critical theoretical frameworks that continue to shape contemporary discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Gherardi (1994) argues that despite the proliferation of these initiatives, they often fall short of addressing the deeper, systemic issues that perpetuate the gender gaps in organisations. This view continues to be echoed by more recent authors such as Ely and Meyerson (2000) who have built on Gherardi’s works by asserting that traditional approaches to gender diversity in organisations are largely superficial, focusing primarily on increasing representation rather than fundamentally altering the underlying organisational structures and cultures that perpetuate gender inequalities. Gherardi (1994) characterises these initiatives as narrow and procedural and that organisations thus choose to emphasize compliance and metrics over meaningful cultural change. Furthermore, Ely and Meyerson (2000) contend that such initiatives often miss the mark by failing to recognize the complex and embedded nature of gender dynamics within organisational practices, power relations, and cultural norms. This is echoed by Cheryan and Markus (2020) who contend that as a result, these initiatives may lead to short-term improvements in gender representation but do little to shift the entrenched organisational cultures that continue to marginalize women and other gender minorities. Ely and Meyerson (2000) advocate for a more holistic approach

that integrates a critical examination of organisational culture, power structures, and everyday practices. Cheryan and Markus (2020) agree with this sentiment and they argue that only by addressing these deeper issues can organisations hope to achieve genuine and sustainable gender equity.

1.2.2 Scope

This research project aims to explore senior female leaders' experiences of the effectiveness of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives within their manufacturing organisations. It seeks to explore whether these DEI programs are seen as genuinely contributing to the reduction of the gender gap while also aiming to understand where they may be perceived as superficial measures that fail to address the deeper, systemic issues contributing to gender inequities.

The research will be grounded in organisational culture theory, particularly Schein's Model of Organisational Culture (2010), which has been later adapted and tested by Hogan and Coote (2014) to assess its aptness for use in examining organisational culture. Schein (2010) will be used to assess how the underlying cultural elements within organisations relate to the success or failure of DEI initiatives. Through qualitative methodologies, specifically semi-structured interviews, the research will explore the lived experiences of women in manufacturing, focusing on the cultural and structural barriers that persist despite the presence of DEI policies.

By focusing on the perceptions of women regarding these initiatives, the study will provide insights into how current DEI efforts align with the actual needs and challenges faced by women in the workplace. This research aims to contribute to the discourse on gender equity within organisations by shedding light on women's perceptions of workplace inclusivity, identifying both the practices they consider genuinely inclusive and those they perceive as exclusionary. By capturing these perspectives, the study provides organisations with a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The insights generated will facilitate informed decision-making, enabling organisations to cultivate more inclusive and culturally responsive work environments. It must be stressed that this research will not focus specifically on turnover in the sector, but that the encouragement of organisations to dealing with the efficacy of current DEI

initiatives may lead to better retention, and as a result help in the achievement of the UN's SDG 5.5.2 goals.

1.2.3 Research Problem Outline

The aim of this research is to investigate how organisational culture within the manufacturing industry is experienced by women in managerial roles and to understand their perspectives on how effectively organisations are addressing the issue creating a more gender inclusive culture. Through a comprehensive examination of organisational cultural values, norms and artefacts prevalent in manufacturing firms, this research aims to identify where women experience challenges and opportunities for gender inclusivity.

1.2.4 Significance of Problem

The gender disparity within the manufacturing sector, particularly in managerial roles, remains a critical concern with wide-ranging implications for both organisational and societal progress. Despite the global push for gender equity through initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5.5.2, which advocates for increased female representation in leadership, substantial barriers persist (United Nations, 2023). As reported by Statistics South Africa, female participation in manufacturing remains disproportionately low, with women constituting only 34.7% of the workforce, compared to 65.3% for men (Stats SA, 2023). Furthermore, the industry's entrenched cultural norms and gender biases hinder the effectiveness of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies aimed at fostering genuine inclusivity (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

A central issue lies in the misalignment between the superficial aspects of DEI policies and the deeper organisational culture, where basic underlying assumptions often perpetuate structural inequities (Simionescu et al., 2021). The emphasis on artefacts and espoused values in DEI efforts frequently neglects these foundational cultural elements, limiting the initiatives' effectiveness in driving sustained cultural transformation (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). This research is therefore significant as it seeks to address this cultural dissonance by examining women's perceptions of DEI initiatives within the manufacturing sector and exploring the nuanced ways in which organisational culture impacts gender equity efforts. Insights derived from this study aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic obstacles hindering gender diversity, thereby informing more effective strategies for achieving

meaningful and lasting change in the sector. The completion of this study enriches the body of knowledge on DEI by providing a perspective on the evolving discourse surrounding gender in organisations. This approach not only enhances theoretical depth but also facilitates a more nuanced application of Schein's model of organisational culture from a gendered perspective, allowing for a critical examination of how underlying assumptions, espoused values, and observable artefacts interact to shape gender dynamics within workplaces. By integrating these perspectives, the author aims to develop a more comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing systemic gender inequalities in organisational settings.

Moreover, given the critical role of manufacturing in South Africa's industrialization agenda, job creation, and economic growth, Berty, Dordevic, and Sever (2025) discuss that advancing gender equity is not just a moral or legal imperative but a strategic necessity. Addressing gender disparity can contribute to improved innovation, productivity, and workforce sustainability, particularly in the face of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) disruptions that demand diverse skill sets and adaptive leadership styles (Wiley and Monllor-Tormos, 2018). By engaging with these challenges through a nuanced, context-specific lens, this research contributes to the broader discourse on gender transformation in the industrial sector and offers practical insights for policymakers, industry leaders, and DEI practitioners striving to reshape manufacturing workplaces into more inclusive and equitable environments.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction and Context Setting

The discourse surrounding gender diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within organisational frameworks has garnered significant scholarly and practical attention over recent decades (Wang, Gomes, Rosa, Copeland, & Santana, 2024). This sentiment is echoed by Kaur and Arora (2020) who contend that diversity and inclusivity initiatives are at the centre of attention for small, medium, and large organisations. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2024), this growing focus is largely driven by both global and regional imperatives that aim to establish equitable and inclusive work environments. Among these are the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5.5.2), which emphasize the importance of enhancing women's participation in leadership roles and implementing structural changes to promote gender equity (United Nations, 2023). Despite these global mandates and the widespread adoption of DEI initiatives, progress within the manufacturing sector remains inconsistent and frequently inadequate (Simionescu et al., (2021). This sector, traditionally male-dominated, exhibits entrenched cultural norms and structural impediments that pose substantial challenges to women's career progression (WEF, 2024).

Central to the effectiveness of DEI initiatives is the role of organisational culture in shaping workplace dynamics (Schein, 2010). Schein's seminal model of organisational culture (discussed later in this chapter) offers a robust analytical lens through which these dynamics can be examined. Schein's model conceptualizes culture as a multi-layered construct comprising three interconnected levels: artifacts (tangible and observable structures and processes), espoused values (explicitly stated strategies, goals, and philosophies), and basic underlying assumptions (deeply ingrained beliefs and unconscious norms) (Hatch, 1993). More contemporary research by authors such as Alwi and Sawitiri (2022) contends that these cultural dimensions collectively influence how gender diversity and inclusivity are perceived and operationalized within an organisation. A nuanced understanding of these levels is essential for identifying gaps between DEI policy intentions and their real-world enactment (Hatch, 1993; Alwi & Sawitiri, 2022).

Gherardi (1994) has argued that the manufacturing sector, with its historical association with attributes deemed traditionally masculine, such as physical

robustness and assertive leadership, offers a distinctive and challenging context for examining the influence of organisational culture on women's perceptions of DEI efforts. Prevailing cultural norms in this sector often reinforce gender biases, marginalizing women and impeding their career advancement (Gherardi, 1994). While numerous organisations within the sector have implemented DEI strategies to mitigate these disparities, the effectiveness of such policies frequently hinges on their congruence with the deeper cultural environment (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Failure to align DEI initiatives with the foundational layers of organisational culture, particularly basic underlying assumptions, risks rendering these efforts superficial and ineffective (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Dwivedi, Gee, Withers, and Boivie (2023) have contended that a critical consequence of poorly integrated DEI policies is the high turnover rate among female employees. An analysis of research underscores that a lack of cultural alignment between DEI initiatives and the broader organisational environment contributes significantly to disengagement and attrition among women (Dwivedi et al., 2023). The WEF (2024) notes that although there has been an incremental increase in women entering the manufacturing workforce, retention remains a persistent challenge exacerbated by cultural barriers that reinforce gender stereotypes. The importance of addressing these cultural factors is underscored by empirical evidence that links supportive work environments to improved retention and career satisfaction, which is in turn crucial for gender diversity (Andersson, Balkmar, & Callerstig, 2022).

This literature review aims to critically analyse the ways in which organisational culture influences women's perceptions of DEI initiatives within the manufacturing sector. By utilizing Schein (2010)'s model as a theoretical foundation, this review will dissect the interplay between cultural artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions to elucidate how these elements shape the perceived authenticity and effectiveness of DEI strategies. Through a synthesis of theoretical insights and empirical studies, this analysis of literature will explore the complex relationship between organisational culture and gender equity, identifying barriers that hinder progress and factors that enable meaningful change.

The sections that follow will provide an examination of the foundational components of organisational culture, women's perceptions of DEI initiatives, and the specific ways culture impacts their career advancement. Additionally, strategies to address

and transform cultural barriers will be discussed to propose pathways for fostering genuine inclusivity. By integrating insights from existing literature, this review seeks to bridge the gap between DEI policy and practice, ultimately contributing to the creation of more inclusive and sustainable work environments within the manufacturing industry.

2.2 Gender and Organisational Culture

Reddy and Jadhav (2019) discuss how agency theory is characterised by the relationship between incentives and self-interest, and can shape culture by influencing leadership decisions, employee behaviour, and overall workplace culture. It is further argued that organisational life and culture is often based on self-interest (Reddy & Jadhav, 2019). Tran (2021) discusses that research on organisational culture shows that there is a relationship between the values of an individual, and the perceived culture of the firm, and there is a suggestion that a correlation between organisational culture and job satisfaction improves employee performance. Akpa, Ashikhia and Nneji (2021) delve deeper into the substantial influence of organisational culture on performance. Akpa et al. (2021) elucidate that literature on organisational culture underscores that a robust, unified culture in harmony with the organisation's objectives can enhance employee engagement, optimize operational processes, and boost overall productivity. In contrast, a culture that lacks alignment can result in disunity, diminished morale, and operational inefficiencies (Akpa, 2021). Additionally, Akpa et al. (2021) further posit that, cultural norms shape decision-making, leadership approaches, and the internal organisational climate. Akpa et al. (2021) suggest that organisations with clearly defined and cohesive cultural values are better positioned to confront external challenges and sustain a competitive advantage. Tran (2021) further contends that leadership plays a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing organisational culture, as leaders set the tone for expected behaviours, values, and norms within the workplace. This suggests that there may be a relationship between organisational culture and leadership attitudes towards it (Tran, 2021).

In contrast to these views Mills (1988) weighed in on this seminal phenomenon by arguing that organisational culture is inherently gendered, embedding assumptions that influence the workplace experiences and opportunities of men and women

differently. Mills (1988) contends that traditional organisational cultures often embody patriarchal values, which can marginalize women and sustain gender inequalities. Ely and Meyerson (2000) adds to this seminal argument by critiquing the reliance on quantitative metrics and targets in DEI strategies, which can obscure the qualitative aspects of gender equity, such as the lived experiences of women within the workplace. Ely and Meyerson (2000) advocate for a more holistic approach that integrates a critical examination of organisational culture, power structures, and everyday practices. More recent feminist critiques highlight the limitations of relying solely on quantitative metrics in DEI strategies (such as measuring percentage of women in leadership), emphasizing the need to incorporate qualitative approaches (collecting personal feedback from women in the workplace) to fully capture the complexities of organisational culture and gender equity (O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2011). O'Shaughnessy & Krogman (2011) argue that traditional quantitative methods may inadvertently perpetuate existing biases and fail to account for the nuanced experiences of marginalized groups, noting that while such methods have exposed structural inequalities like wage gaps, they often overlook the subjective experiences and social contexts that qualitative methods can reveal.

In the debate between qualitative and quantitative metric approaches Chatman and Choi (2022) argue that understanding and measuring organisational culture require a unified theoretical paradigm that integrates both qualitative and quantitative data. Chatman and Choi (2022) caution that without this integration, the efforts of gender diversity equity and inclusion transformation risks stagnation and may fail to advance comprehensively. Various scholars are thus aligned with the reasoning of Ely and Meyerson (2000), that a more holistic approach to examining organisational culture is necessary to move the conversation forward.

Ely and Meyerson (2000) argue that only by addressing these deeper cultural issues can organisations hope to achieve genuine and sustainable gender equity. Mills (1988) contested that the effects of gendered cultures on various facets of work life, such as recruitment, promotion, and everyday interactions are all influenced by the inherent culture within the organisation. It is suggested that these cultures can hinder women's progress and reinforce gender stereotypes (Mills, 1988). Mills (1988) like many other authors that followed advocates for a critical re-evaluation of organisational cultures to enhance gender equity, emphasizing the need to

incorporate diverse perspectives and eliminate gendered biases. The research of Mills (1988), along with subsequent studies by scholars such as Ely and Meyerson (2000) and even more recently Clark-Saboda and Lemke (2023), underscores the critical importance of aligning organisational culture with gender equity objectives to achieve meaningful gender parity. These works emphasise the need to challenge and dismantle deeply entrenched gendered, hegemonic and patriarchal cultural norms within organisations, as these cultural roots significantly contribute to the persistence of the gender gap.

Acker (2006) contest that the interplay between organisational culture and broader societal norms presents a complex tension that organisations must navigate when striving for gender diversity, equity, and inclusion. Research suggests that while organisations may implement progressive gender policies, these efforts often remain superficial unless they address the underlying cultural assumptions embedded in both the workplace and the wider socio-cultural environment (Acker, 2006). This raises a fundamental question: to what extent is it the responsibility of organisations to challenge these deeply ingrained gendered norms? Du, Nordell, and Joseph (2022) argue that organisations must assume an active role in reshaping gendered expectations, as they serve as key institutions in the reproduction of societal norms. Ahmed (2012) cautions against the risk of performative compliance, where gender initiatives become symbolic gestures rather than substantive interventions that disrupt hegemonic structures.

A critical distinction must therefore be drawn between genuine cultural transformation and the adoption of performative diversity strategies that merely serve as reputational safeguards (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010). True transformation necessitates an alignment between policy and practice, requiring leadership commitment, structural change, and a shift in underlying values to dismantle systemic gender biases (Connell, 2006). Failure to engage in this deeper level of transformation risks reinforcing existing power dynamics, ultimately maintaining rather than resolving gender inequities (Connell, 2006). Thus, organisations must critically reflect on whether their gender diversity efforts are disrupting or inadvertently reinforcing the very norms they seek to challenge (Connell, 2006).

2.2.1 Defining Organisational Culture

Schein (2010) discusses that organisational culture encapsulates the collective values, beliefs, and norms that influence both individual and group behaviour within an organisation. Zeb, Akbar, Hussain, Safi, Rabnawaz, and Zeb (2021) further add to this definition by describing that it serves as an implicit yet powerful framework that shapes employee interactions, decision-making processes, and beliefs that employees in the organisation share. These thoughts are echoed by Burnett and Aguinis (2024), who further state that the intricate nature of organisational culture underscores its pivotal role in determining the effectiveness of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and women's experiences in professional environments.

Hatch (1993) provides a comprehensive examination of the seminal phenomenon of organisational culture through the lens of Schein's model, delineating it into three distinct levels: Artifacts, Values, and Assumptions. According to Hatch (1993), organisational culture manifests at these three levels, with basic assumptions underpinning the values within an organisation, which subsequently inform the observable artifacts (Hatch, 1993). The relationship between these levels is visually represented in Figure 1, illustrating how foundational assumptions drive the formulation of values, which, in turn, shape the artifacts enacted by an organisation.

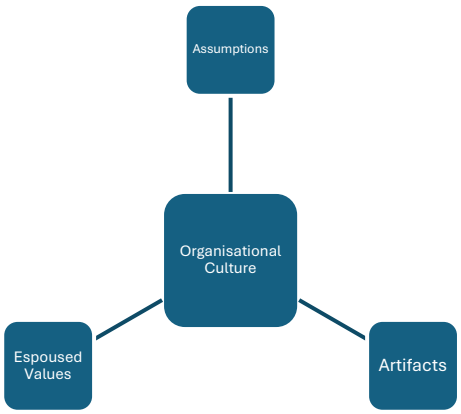

Figure 1 – Schein's Model on Organisational Culture - adapted from Hatch (1993).

Schein's model delineates organisational culture into three interrelated levels:

- **Artifacts** - The most observable and tangible elements of culture, including physical settings, dress codes, and formal policies (Byrne, Cave, & Raymer, 2022). Artifacts act as initial indicators of an organisation's values but offer

limited insights into deeper motivations (Byrne et al., 2022). Lam, Nguyen, Le, & Tran (2021) further add that while they provide a surface-level understanding, they must be critically analysed to discern their alignment with more profound cultural beliefs.

- **Espoused Values** - as defined by Bourne, Jenkins, Parry (2019), are the explicitly stated principles, strategies, and goals that an organisation claims to uphold. Although they reflect an organisation's professed priorities, the real impact of these values hinges on their congruence with daily practices (Bourne et al., 2019). Disparities between espoused values and actual behaviours can erode trust and credibility (Bourne et al., 2019).

- **Basic Underlying Assumptions** – Manzi and Heilman (2021) contend that these are the most entrenched beliefs, often operating unconsciously and that they form the foundation of cultural norms and are the most resistant to change. Such assumptions exert significant influence on core behaviours and can reinforce gender biases if not addressed (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). Boulware, Corbie, Aguilar-Gaxiola, and Wilkins (2022) echo these sentiments and further discuss that these underlying beliefs shape how DEI initiatives are perceived and can perpetuate structural inequities if left unchallenged. Wedgewood (2009) contends that understanding these assumptions requires situating them within the broader hegemonic nature of patriarchal value systems, which dictate societal norms and hierarchies. Patriarchy functions as a dominant ideology that embeds itself into institutional structures and everyday practices, often rendering gender biases invisible or 'naturalized' (Wedgewood, 2009). As a result, these assumptions are not only deeply rooted but are also reinforced through socialization, workplace norms, and leadership expectations that favour traditionally masculine traits (Wedgewood, 2009). To challenge such entrenched biases, organisations must engage in critical reflexivity, examining how implicit power dynamics shape decision-making and cultural expectations (Acker, 2006). Without addressing the patriarchal underpinnings of these assumptions, DEI efforts may be at risk of being perceived as performative.

In their analysis Hogan and Coote (2014) suggest that values indirectly foster innovative behaviours through the mediation of norms and artifacts. These characterisations are echoed by Akpa et al. (2021) who contend that artifacts represent the observable and material manifestations of an organisation's culture, encompassing the physical setting, language expressions, and ceremonial practices that are readily apparent to both insiders and outsiders. These artifacts serve as the most superficial layer of culture, providing visible cues about the underlying values and beliefs (Akpa et al., 2021). Espoused values, on the other hand, are the explicitly stated principles and standards that the organisation professes to uphold (Akpa et al., 2021). These declared values and norms act as a guiding framework for employees' behaviours, shaping their actions and decisions within the organisational context.

Akpa et al. (2021) posit that at the deepest level of Schein's model are the basic underlying assumptions, which consist of deeply ingrained, unconscious beliefs and perceptions that members of the organisation take for granted. These fundamental assumptions form the core of the organisational culture, influencing how individuals perceive, think, and feel about various aspects of their work environment, including aspects such as gender diversity (Akpa et al., 2021). In the context of gender diversity, such deeply embedded assumptions may shape expectations about leadership, decision-making, and workplace behaviour, reinforcing traditional gender roles within organisations (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). For instance, if an organisation implicitly associates leadership with traditionally masculine traits, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and decisiveness, women who exhibit different leadership styles may be perceived as less competent or effective (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). Consequently, these assumptions may not only influence recruitment and promotion decisions but also shape how DEI initiatives are perceived and implemented.

In contrast, Alwi and Sawitiri (2022) challenge the applicability of Schein’s model in contemporary contexts. They advocate for the Hatch Culture and Dynamics Model, which incorporates values, assumptions, symbols, and artifacts, as a more comprehensive framework for describing organisational culture. According to Alwi and Sawitiri (2022), values influence norms and artifacts, which subsequently affect behaviours and underlying assumptions. Authors such as Ely and Meyerson (2000) have argued that the use of gender DEI initiatives by organisations has been done

in order to achieve quantifiable metrics which, but have done very little to address the gender gap caused by the underlying culture in the organisations. The focus of organisations on artefacts rather than the basis of the underlying assumptions particularly by women in the organisation, is in many ways the reason why there continues to be very little progress in the gender gap conversation (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). This reinforces the perception that such initiatives are primarily performative, serving as symbolic compliance mechanisms rather than substantive efforts to drive meaningful structural transformation (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021).

This presents a potential area for further investigation, as understanding the interplay of cultural layers in fostering gender diversity and the perceptions of women in manufacturing organisations of the current gender DEI initiatives could offer valuable insights into enhancing inclusivity within organisations, and go a long way to addressing the UN's SDG 5.5.2 in the manufacturing industry in South Africa. Schein's model will be used in this research to identify the explicit artefacts that the different organisations have focussed on, and also highlight the implicit norms and values which have not been effectively been addressed by the organisations in order to address the gender gap in manufacturing.

A comprehensive understanding of these levels is essential for evaluating how organisational culture influences the perception and implementation of DEI strategies. The interplay between artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions creates a complex cultural ecosystem that shapes employees' lived experiences and the perceived legitimacy of DEI efforts (Lenberg, Feldt, & Wallgren Tenberg, 2019).

2.2.2 The Role of Artifacts in Shaping Perceptions

Artifacts, as the visible manifestation of organisational culture, play a significant role in shaping initial perceptions of DEI initiatives (Lam et al., 2021). They include diversity statements, gender-neutral policies, and public celebrations such as International Women's Day (Byrne et al., 2022). Various authors such as Schein (2010) have however noted that while such artifacts can signal an organisation's commitment to gender equity, their impact often depends on their alignment with deeper cultural values.

Empirical research supports the notion that women critically assess visible organisational elements, such as policies, symbols, and leadership behaviours, to

determine their alignment with their lived experiences (Tran, 2021). When these artifacts are perceived as merely performative gestures rather than genuine commitments to inclusivity, they can result in disillusionment and disengagement, ultimately undermining trust in the organisation's DEI efforts (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021). The study by Wang et al. (2024) further emphasizes that superficial or symbolic changes, such as diversity statements or token representation, fail to foster meaningful inclusion if they are not accompanied by transformative shifts in underlying cultural norms and power structures. Without substantive action, these initiatives risk reinforcing scepticism among employees and perpetuating the status quo rather than challenging systemic barriers to gender equity.

In male-dominated sectors like manufacturing, artifacts can inadvertently sustain existing power dynamics (Byrne et al., 2022). For example, recognition systems that reward traditionally masculine traits, such as competitiveness and assertiveness, reinforce gendered hierarchies (Boulware et al., 2022). Thus, for DEI initiatives to resonate authentically, artifacts must embody a more inclusive set of values that prioritise collaboration, empathy, and collective achievement (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024).. These values should not be imposed unilaterally but rather developed through a participatory process involving structured feedback sessions and consultations with women, ensuring that their perspectives and experiences inform the design and implementation of DEI strategies (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024).

2.2.3 Espoused Values and Their Alignment with Practices

Espoused values, reflected in organisational mission statements, strategic objectives, and codes of conduct, articulate an organisation's formal commitments to DEI (Bourne et al., 2019). However, the effectiveness of these values is contingent upon their actual implementation (Bourne et al., 2019).

Carnes, Fine, and Sheridan (2019) found that organisations with high alignment between espoused values and practical applications achieve greater success in their DEI efforts. For instance, an organisation that espouses a commitment to diversity but fails to implement transparent promotion practices may perpetuate implicit biases (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021). Conversely, firms that support women through mentorship programs and targeted leadership training cultivate trust and foster engagement (Long, Buzzanell, Kokini, Wilson, Batra, & Anderson, 2019).

The perception of fairness and inclusivity is also shaped by this alignment (Lenberg et al., 2019). Van Laer, Verbruggen, and Janssens (2021) assert that DEI initiatives are more positively received when embedded within a culture that genuinely values gender equity. This requires integrating policy changes with shifts in leadership behaviour, day-to-day interactions, and decision-making processes (Lam et al., 2021). The visible and authentic application of espoused values can strengthen perceptions of an inclusive environment (Schein, 2010).

2.2.4 Basic Underlying Assumptions - The Foundation of Organisational Culture

Basic underlying assumptions constitute the most profound layer of organisational culture (Schein, 2010). These subconscious beliefs fundamentally influence how employees think and act within the organisation (Wang et al., 2024). Schein (2010) emphasises that while these assumptions are challenging to identify and change, they are crucial for understanding the real drivers of cultural behaviour.

In the context of gender diversity, these assumptions can include entrenched beliefs about leadership characteristics and role suitability (Boulware et al., 2022). Assumptions that equate effective leadership with assertiveness and dominance may disadvantage women who exhibit collaborative or empathetic leadership styles (Boulware et al., 2022). These beliefs, if unchallenged, sustain gender norms that undermine the effectiveness of DEI initiatives and limit women's advancement (Carnes et al., 2019).

To further understand the root of this cultural dynamic, it is important to review the boarder societal context. Hegemonic value systems shape societal institutions and organisational culture by embedding dominant ideologies that reinforce existing power hierarchies, often to the detriment of marginalised groups such as women (Downey, Lawrence, Pyles, & Lee, 2020). Downey et al. (2020) posit that these assumptions operate at a subconscious level, where gender equity initiatives are often adopted in form but resisted in practice due to the persistence of entrenched beliefs about male leadership superiority and the naturalization of women in subordinate roles.

This aligns with McCarthy, Soundararajan, and Taylor's (2020) examination of hegemonic masculinity in global value chains (GVCs), which highlights how labour governance mechanisms are constructed within deep-seated gendered

assumptions that position men as decision-makers and women as peripheral workers. Rather than disrupting gendered hierarchies, these governance structures often reinforce them, as empowerment programs are designed within existing patriarchal economic models, ultimately serving organisational efficiency rather than challenging gendered power imbalances (McCarthy et al., 2020). At the level of underlying assumptions, organisations and institutions may outwardly promote DEI initiatives, but if their deeply embedded cultural scripts continue to equate leadership with hegemonic masculinity and caregiving with femininity, substantive gender transformation may remain elusive (Downey et al., 2020). Addressing gender DEI in organisations thus necessitates a fundamental shift in power dynamics and the deconstruction of gendered assumptions that sustain hegemonic masculinity at the deepest cultural level.

To address these deep-rooted cultural elements, organisations must adopt targeted strategies beyond mere policy enactment (Lenberg et al., 2019). Van Laer et al. (2021) advocate for comprehensive interventions, including leadership training that challenges traditional beliefs, cultural audits, and fostering an environment that celebrates diverse leadership models. Failure to address these fundamental assumptions can render DEI strategies superficial and incapable of achieving sustainable change (Wang et al., 2024).

2.2.5 Integrating Theoretical Perspectives for a Holistic View

While Schein's (2010) model provides a robust foundational framework, integrating complementary theoretical perspectives enhances the analysis of how culture impacts DEI. Dimensions such as power distance and masculinity versus femininity shed light on why certain gendered practices persist in industries like manufacturing (Smith, Peterson, & Schwartz, 2002). These reinforce hierarchical workplace structures where leadership is traditionally male-dominated, making it difficult for women to access decision-making roles (Smith et al., 2002). Additionally, masculine workplace cultures prioritize competitiveness, assertiveness, and physical endurance traits historically associated with men, while devaluing skills linked to femininity, such as collaboration and emotional intelligence (Smith et al., 2002). This can result in implicit barriers to gender diversity, including exclusion from leadership networks, limited mentorship opportunities, and resistance to inclusive policies.

Furthermore, Van Laer et al.'s (2021) transformational DEI approaches underscore the importance of systemic change. Their approaches advocate for strategies that

transcend superficial inclusivity, aiming to reconfigure power relations and shift cultural norms genuinely (Van Laer et al., 2021). The synthesis of these perspectives enriches the understanding of organisational culture's role in shaping DEI initiatives, offering practical guidance for developing inclusive environments that resonate with women, particularly in traditionally male-dominated sectors (Lenberg et al., 2019).

2.3 Gender Diversity in Boardrooms

Reguera-Alvarado and Bravo-Urquiza (2020) argue that the existence of a gender diverse company management, is thought to ameliorate the tendencies for biases and prejudices amongst employees. It is further posited that the presence of a more gender diverse management, not only allows for a multitude of views, which help with the governance of a company, but also proved to improve on firm outcomes such as financial performance, and sustainability (Reguera-Alvarado & Bravo-Urquiza, 2020). Fine and Sojo and Lawford-Smith (2020) also provide a comprehensive review of the significance of workplace gender diversity (WGD), exploring both justice-based and organisational benefits. Fine et al. (2020) emphasise that gender diversity is crucial not only for individual justice but also for improving organisational outcomes. In their analysis of the benefits of WGD Fine et al. (2020) highlight that increasing WGD can reduce sex discrimination and combat androcentrism in products and services and that by ensuring that women are adequately represented, organisations can address biases and create more inclusive work environments.

This view is echoed by Wiley and Monllor-Tormos (2018) who contests that the existence of diversity in organisations has both social and performance benefits. Reddy and Jadhav (2019) however state that literature has mixed views on the impact of gender diversity on the performance outcomes of an organisation. Jones and Turner and Latu (2022) have found that the resistance to gender diversity in part stems from the perceived threat to a traditionally masculine workplace and culture. Traditionally, corporate environments, particularly in male-dominated industries, have been shaped by hegemonic masculinity, which privileges traits such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and dominance (Connell, 2006). As a result, efforts to promote gender inclusivity may be met with opposition, as they challenge long-established power dynamics and norms that define leadership in these settings (Connell, 2006).

In achieving higher female representation in boardrooms organisations will effectively address the artefacts aspect of organisational culture by visibly increased number of senior women (Simionesu et al., 2021). Ely and Meyerson (2000) however argue that it is not enough to address the quantitative aspect of gender diversity, and that the other levels of culture, as described in the seminal works of Schein (2010) are potentially more important in addressing the gender gap in workplaces. By fostering gender diversity, organisations can enhance their ethical decision-making, improve occupational well-being, and create more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

Fine et al. (2020) argue that diversity can lead to a broader range of experiences, knowledge, and skills within teams, fostering better decision-making and problem-solving, however, they caution against over-reliance on empirical claims about performance benefits, suggesting that these may not always materialize as expected. Fine et al. (2020) call for a nuanced approach to diversity initiatives, grounded in evidence and tailored to the specific needs and goals of organisations. This view is echoed by authors such as Clark-Saboda and Lemke (2023) who have contended that DEI initiatives have been largely inefficient and have focussed on fixing women, rather than addressing the cultural aspects of the organisation which women perceive to be barriers in their plight to achieve parity in manufacturing organisations.

Gherardi (1994) argued that the foundation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in organisations should not only focus on achieving the appearance of gender transformation but also on addressing the deeply rooted patriarchal cultural norms that prevail within these organisations. Clark and Lemke (2023) concurred with this perspective, emphasizing that organisational failure to achieve meaningful transformation is largely due to an inability to confront and change these cultural norms and underlying assumptions. This research aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the perceptions of women regarding DEI initiatives in their organisations, specifically examining how these initiatives have either fostered a culture conducive to gender diversity or hindered its progress.

2.3.1 Current State of Gender Diversity

Gender diversity in boardrooms remains a subject of significant academic inquiry due to its profound implications for corporate governance, strategic decision-making, and overall organisational performance (WEF, 2024). While there has been notable

progress in recent years, the representation of women on corporate boards continues to lag, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing (Adams & Funk, 2012). Research underscores that despite increased global attention to gender parity, these advancements are unevenly distributed, with certain regions and industries showing minimal change (WEF, 2024). For example, manufacturing, historically male-dominated, illustrates the persistence of gender disparities due to longstanding cultural norms, implicit biases, and structural impediments (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Empirical evidence suggests that organisations benefit from gender-diverse boards, reporting improvements in innovation, risk assessment, and financial outcomes (Simionescu et al., 2021). However, moving beyond superficial gains, the path to genuine gender equity requires comprehensive changes, including reshaping corporate culture to support women's professional development from entry-level roles to executive positions (Biswas, Chapple, Roberts, & Stainback, 2023). Policies alone are insufficient; fostering an inclusive environment necessitates a paradigm shift in the cultural fabric of organisations (Glass & Cook, 2020).

2.3.2 Barriers to Boardroom Diversity

Numerous barriers inhibit the advancement of women to boardroom positions, with many rooted in deeply entrenched organisational and societal norms (Rhode & Packel, 2014). Eagly and Karau (2002) found that a critical challenge is the perception of leadership, which often equates effective leadership traits with stereotypically masculine qualities such as assertiveness and dominance. Such narrow leadership archetypes perpetuate exclusionary practices, leading to the underrepresentation of women at the highest echelons of corporate governance (Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo, & Michel, 2018).

Structural impediments further compound the issue, notably the "glass ceiling" effect that obstructs the career progression of qualified women (Neugart & Zaharieva, 2018). Organisational recruitment and promotion practices often favour candidates who align with existing leadership prototypes, thereby reinforcing homogeneity in board composition (Rhode & Packel, 2014). These practices sustain an environment where women are systematically overlooked, despite possessing the requisite skills and qualifications (Gabaldon, De Anca, Mateos de Cabo, & Gimeno, 2016). Moreover, the absence of robust mentorship and sponsorship programs

exacerbates this disparity by limiting women's access to critical networks and career opportunities (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011).

An additional yet frequently underexplored factor contributing to gender disparities in boardroom representation is ambivalent sexism (Naidoo, Mthombeni, & Chiba, 2024). Unlike explicit discrimination, ambivalent sexism encompasses both hostile sexism, which entails overtly negative perceptions of women, and benevolent sexism, which presents as ostensibly positive attitudes but ultimately serves to constrain women by reinforcing traditional gender norms (Naidoo et al., 2024). The study conducted by Naidoo et al. (2024) highlights the particularly pervasive nature of benevolent sexism, as it cultivates the notion that women require protection and guidance in leadership contexts, thereby providing a rationale for their marginalization in critical decision-making roles.

2.3.3 Impact of Boardroom Diversity on Organisational Performance

The benefits of gender diversity in boardrooms are well-documented and extend beyond symbolic representation (Shin, 2023). Boards that include women are associated with enhanced decision-making processes due to the incorporation of diverse perspectives and varied experiential backgrounds (Shin, 2023). This heterogeneity enables a more comprehensive evaluation of strategic options, fostering a culture of critical inquiry that can mitigate groupthink and enhance organisational resilience (Adams & Ferreira, 2009).

Moreover, gender-diverse leadership is linked to improved corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Alhosani & Nobanee, 2023). Simionescu et al., (2021)'s research indicates that companies with higher female representation on boards are more likely to engage in ethical practices and prioritise stakeholder interests. This alignment with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals not only strengthens the ethical standing of organisations but also contributes to long-term value creation through enhanced reputation and stakeholder trust (Hamad, Draz, & Lai, 2020).

2.3.4 Strategies to Enhance Boardroom Diversity

Addressing the underrepresentation of women in boardrooms necessitates a multi-layered approach that combines policy interventions with organisational transformation (Buse, Bernstein, & Bilmoria, 2016). While gender quotas have been

implemented in several industries to expedite progress, their efficacy often wanes without complementary cultural shifts (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020). Sustainable change relies on cultivating an environment that values diversity at all levels and actively promotes the career advancement of women through tailored developmental programs (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020).

Leadership development and mentorship initiatives play a pivotal role in equipping women with the skills and networks necessary for board-level positions (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). These programs not only bridge existing gaps but also foster confidence and leadership acumen among women (Kulkarni & Mishra, 2022). Additionally, cultural audits that assess and address unconscious biases within organisations can realign stated values with actual practices, ensuring that DEI policies are executed effectively (Tran, 2021). Such audits serve as a diagnostic tool to identify barriers and create actionable strategies to dismantle them (Tran, 2021).

A progressive approach requires organisations to champion inclusive leadership styles that recognise and reward diverse qualities (Hunt, Prince, Dixon-Fyle, & Yee, 2020). By valuing a range of leadership attributes beyond traditional archetypes, companies can broaden the pipeline of potential senior management candidates and foster an environment conducive to varied leadership models (Hunt et al., 2020). Kirsch (2022) echoes these sentiments and further argues that this holistic strategy, which integrates policy measures, mentorship, and cultural recalibration, positions organisations to better reflect societal values and enhance overall performance through the inclusion of diverse voices.

2.4 Challenges to Gender Diversity in the Manufacturing Sector

2.4.1 Historical and Structural Barriers

The manufacturing sector has historically fostered a culture that prioritises technical proficiency and physical resilience attributes, which traditionally linked to masculinity (Gherardi, 1994). This legacy has entrenched structural barriers that significantly impede women's participation and upward mobility (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). Powel and Sang (2015) argue that the allocation of training and development resources further reflects these biases, as men are more likely to be offered opportunities that prepare them for leadership roles. Such practices contribute to the perpetuation of

a workforce where women are underrepresented, particularly in decision-making positions (Powel & Sang, 2015).

Informal networks within male-dominated industries exacerbate these barriers (Mickey, 2022). The influence of these networks extends to promotions and strategic career moves, creating a landscape where access is limited for women (Mickey, 2022). These exclusionary practices stifle diversity and hinder the development of an inclusive leadership pipeline (Kalev et al., 2006). Furthermore, the persistent shortage of female role models in leadership positions reinforces the perception that manufacturing is an inhospitable environment for women, thus perpetuating a self-reinforcing cycle of underrepresentation (WEF, 2024). Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) have argued that addressing these structural impediments necessitates targeted interventions that include transparent recruitment practices and mentorship programs aimed at supporting women in navigating these networks.

Acker (2006) posits that organisations with entrenched bureaucratic systems may inadvertently hinder diversity efforts due to their inherent resistance to change. Bureaucratic structures, characterized by rigid hierarchies and standardized procedures, often lack the agility required to adapt to DEI initiatives (DEI) (Acker 2006). This rigidity can perpetuate existing inequalities and impede the implementation of inclusive practices and therefore, addressing these structural challenges is crucial for fostering genuine inclusivity within organisations (Acker, 2006).

Furthermore, while many organisations express a commitment to DEI initiatives, the extent to which these efforts align with deeply embedded organisational culture remains an area of inquiry. Some DEI initiatives appear to be performative in nature, characterized by high-visibility statements, diversity targets, and selective appointments, which may create the perception of progress but raise questions about whether they address systemic inequities in a meaningful way (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021). Often these initiatives are perceived as tokenistic as they are framed as commitment to workplace diversity, however they reinforces exclusion and frustration for women by positioning them as symbolic representatives rather than valued contributors (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Moreover, tokenism fosters scepticism about their legitimacy, leading to heightened scrutiny, diminished authority, and limited access to informal networks of power (McCarthy et al., 2020). As a result, rather than fostering inclusion, tokenistic diversity initiatives exacerbate workplace

inequities, reinforcing a cycle of frustration, disengagement, and attrition among women who perceive their presence as performative rather than transformative (McCarthy et al., 2020). These initiatives, often shaped by external expectations rather than internal transformation, may not fully engage with underlying power structures, implicit biases, and institutional barriers that contribute to exclusion (Tran, 2021). Emerging research suggests that organisations that rely on performative DEI efforts, such as one-time training sessions or policy adjustments, may face scepticism and disengagement, particularly from individuals who evaluate these efforts against their own lived experiences (Wang et al., 2024). This raises important considerations about the role of organisational culture in shaping the effectiveness of DEI strategies. A shift beyond performative measures toward structural and cultural change may be essential for ensuring that DEI initiatives translate into lasting, equitable workplace practices (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021). However, the question remains: What conditions enable organisations to move beyond performative gestures and embed DEI into their foundational culture?

2.4.2 Cultural Assumptions and Stereotypes

Cultural assumptions and gender stereotypes are significant contributors to the barriers women face in the manufacturing sector (Heilman, Caleo, & Manzi, 2024). Prevailing beliefs that women are less suited for high-pressure environments continue to impede their inclusion in leadership pathways (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Such stereotypes lead to biased evaluations of women's capabilities, thereby limiting their access to roles that are deemed “too demanding” (Heilman, Caleo, & Manzi, 2024). Organisational cultures that reward traits stereotypically associated with masculinity, such as competitiveness and assertiveness, often overlook or undervalue qualities like empathy and collaboration, which are essential for holistic leadership (Du et al., 2022).

It has been suggested that dismantling entrenched stereotypes may require targeted interventions such as cultural audits and training programs aimed at raising awareness of unconscious biases (Du et al., 2022). However, the researcher seeks to understand to what extent do these interventions effectively challenge deep-seated cultural assumptions within organisations, and moreover, what additional strategies might be necessary to foster meaningful and lasting change? These initiatives can help shift organisational norms towards recognizing and valuing diverse leadership styles (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Environments which promote

varied approaches to problem-solving and leadership not only support gender diversity but also improve overall organisational effectiveness (Hedija & Memec, 2021). Thus, addressing cultural assumptions is critical to creating an atmosphere where women feel both valued and empowered (Hedija & Memec, 2021).

2.4.3 Workplace Policies and Practices

While many organisations have adopted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies aimed at promoting gender diversity, the inconsistency in their application often undermines their effectiveness (Kalev, Kelly, Dobbin, 2006). For instance, flexible work arrangements and anti-discrimination measures, although widely implemented, can be perceived as superficial if not reinforced by the organisational culture (Tran, 2021). Policies that exist in name only, without tangible, actionable support, may contribute to employee disengagement and foster cynicism (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020).

Empirical evidence highlights that DEI policies are most effective when integrated into the fabric of everyday organisational practices (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Brouwers and Paltu (2020) argue that leadership support plays a pivotal role in modelling and reinforcing these policies. Leaders must not only endorse these measures but also demonstrate commitment through their actions, such as advocating for gender-balanced project teams and participating in diversity training (Ely & Thomas, 2001). This level of commitment signals to employees that gender diversity is a core organisational priority, rather than a superficial checkbox (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

2.4.4 Intersectional Challenges

The concept of intersectionality introduces additional complexity to the challenges of achieving gender diversity in the manufacturing sector (Crenshaw, 2013). Women who are also members of other marginalized groups, such as racial or ethnic minorities, often face compounded forms of bias and discrimination (Collins & Bilge, 2020). These intersecting identities can magnify obstacles related to career progression and contribute to a heightened sense of isolation in the workplace (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Research by Collins and Bilge (2020) affirms that the unique experiences of these women are frequently overlooked in conventional DEI strategies, which tend to focus on gender as a monolithic category.

Collins and Bilge (2020) assert that for DEI initiatives to be truly inclusive, organisations must adopt an intersectional approach that acknowledges and addresses these multifaceted challenges. This approach could include fostering open dialogue and building allyship programs that engage a broad range of voices to ensure diverse perspectives are considered (Roberson, 2019).

Addressing the challenges to gender diversity in the manufacturing sector requires a comprehensive approach that tackles historical and structural barriers, challenges cultural assumptions, ensures the consistent application of workplace policies, and incorporates an intersectional lens. Such efforts will enable organisations to develop more supportive and equitable work environments that align with contemporary DEI standards.

2.5 Strategies for Enhancing Gender Diversity and Inclusion

2.5.1 Leadership Commitment and Role Modelling

Leadership commitment is foundational to the success of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, with empirical studies consistently underscoring the impact of leadership on fostering inclusive cultures (Ng & Sears, 2020). Ely and Meyerson (2000) argue that when leaders act as visible proponents of gender diversity, the likelihood of achieving meaningful DEI outcomes significantly increases. Effective leadership commitment transcends policy endorsement and extends to embodying inclusive principles through consistent behaviour and decision-making (Ng & Sears, 2020). The presence of role models who actively practice inclusive leadership fosters an environment where diversity is respected and valued (Ilyas, Sohail, Ashraf, & Rehman, 2024).

Ilyas et al. (2024) further contends that the role of leadership in promoting gender diversity is also linked to increased trust and employee engagement. Ilyas et al. (2024) posit that when leaders not only advocate for DEI policies but also participate in DEI-focused initiatives, the organisation benefits from higher levels of trust and morale among employees. This participatory leadership model is critical in setting behavioural norms and expectations, ensuring that management is held accountable for DEI performance (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020). Moreover, fostering open dialogue and integrating diverse perspectives into strategic decision-making reinforces a

culture of inclusivity, as demonstrated by Brouwers and Paltu's (2020) analysis of leadership practices.

2.5.2 Training and Development Programs

Ng and Sears (2020) discuss that training and development programs remain essential for cultivating a culture that embraces diversity and inclusion. These programs should be strategically designed to address unconscious bias, promote cultural competence, and align leadership skills with inclusive values (Ng & Sears, 2020). These thoughts are echoed by Eagly, Carli and Carli (2007), who further contend that specialized training for developing female leadership is also imperative for equitable gender diversity conversations. Eagly and Karau (2002) argue that while traditional leadership skills are often prioritised, attributes such as empathy, collaboration, and adaptive thinking, which are frequently underappreciated, are critical for effective leadership. Investment in such targeted training enhances the pipeline of women leaders, positioning them for higher executive roles and promoting organisational diversity (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The success of these training initiatives depends on their integration into broader strategic frameworks (Ng & Sears, 2020). Programs should be evaluated for their effectiveness through measurable outcomes, ensuring that they contribute to sustained cultural transformation rather than serving as standalone efforts (Ng & Sears, 2020). Incorporating qualitative approaches in training programs is essential to facilitate meaningful dialogue across diverse groups, moving beyond performative measures (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). Research indicates that such dialogic methods can lead to meaningful changes in attitudes and behaviours, as they address underlying biases and promote empathy among participants and therefore, integrating facilitated intergroup dialogue into training programs can enhance their effectiveness, ensuring they contribute to authentic and lasting organisational change (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013).

2.5.3 Mentorship and Sponsorship

Mentorship and sponsorship are pivotal in addressing the advancement barriers faced by women, particularly in industries traditionally dominated by men, such as manufacturing (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Gherardi (1994) and recent studies by Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) underscore that women with access to both mentors and sponsors experience faster career progression and are more likely to attain leadership roles.

Mentorship programs provide valuable guidance and foster professional development, equipping women with the insights and support needed to navigate complex career pathways (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Sponsorship, on the other hand, involves influential advocates who actively promote their proteges' career advancement and open doors to opportunities that may otherwise be inaccessible (Ely et al., 2011). Authors such as Helms, Arfken and Bellar (2016), and later Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) contend that establishing formal, structured mentorship and sponsorship frameworks is crucial for ensuring consistency and inclusivity in their application. This aligns to the findings of de Vries, Webb, and Eveline (2006), who discuss that mentorship programs must focus on structural and cultural transformation, otherwise they may lead to inadvertently reinforcing the notion that women need to be “fixed”.

2.5.4 Policy Reforms and Flexibility

Comprehensive policy reforms that facilitate work-life balance and flexibility are essential for retaining women in the workforce and promoting gender diversity (Ng & Sears, 2020). Ng and Sears (2020) posits that policies such as flexible work arrangements, extended parental leave, and caregiving support are particularly beneficial in addressing the unique challenges faced by women. However, the mere existence of these policies is insufficient; organisations must cultivate a culture that normalises their use without stigmatization or perceived career penalties (Ng & Sears, 2020).

The implementation of these policies requires clear communication and active management support (Tran, 2021). Tran (2021) highlights that leadership training should incorporate strategies that underscore the value of flexibility and its alignment with organisational productivity and employee well-being. Organisations should track the usage of these policies and their impact on career development to ensure they contribute to meaningful change (Ng & Sears, 2020).

2.5.5 Cultural Audits, Continuous Improvement, and Psychological Safety

Ely and Thomas (2020) have suggested that cultural audits may be a useful strategic tool for assessing the effectiveness of DEI efforts. Cultural audits follow a more qualitative approach to understanding cultural norms, and as may have the potential to reveal underlying biases and gaps that may hinder DEI progress, however the environment must be conducive to accept constructive feedback (Ely & Thomas,

2020). Such insights inform targeted strategies to address systemic challenges and refine policy implementation (Ng & Sears, 2020). It is thus crucial that these audits are conducted in a manner that facilitates genuine feedback. Emphasizing women's lived experiences, rather than relying solely on quantitative data collection, may provide deeper insights into the underlying gendered culture, which quantitative metrics alone may fail to fully capture (Nishii, 2013).

Continuous improvement is integral to sustaining DEI advancements (Roberson, 2019). Organisations must adopt an iterative approach that incorporates feedback, revisits existing initiatives, and measures outcomes regularly (Ng & Sears, 2020). This process ensures that DEI strategies remain adaptive and responsive to the evolving needs of the workforce. Roberson (2019) argues that by maintaining a cycle of feedback and adjustment, organisations can foster a culture where continuous improvement efforts towards DEI becomes ingrained in everyday operations. However, the effectiveness of this approach is contingent upon an organisational culture that encourages open and constructive feedback (Clark, 2020). Psychological safety, the extent to which employees feel safe to voice concerns, challenge biases, and contribute diverse perspectives, plays a foundational role in fostering this culture (Clark, 2020). When employees trust that their input will be valued rather than penalised, DEI initiatives can evolve in ways that are both inclusive and sustainable (Clark, 2020).

The adoption of these strategies collectively strengthens the organisational culture, supporting the retention and advancement of women and contributing to a more diverse, effective, and sustainable workforce (Ng & Sears, 2020).

2.6 Turnover and Retention Challenges

Alam and Asim (2019) argue that turnover is comprised of three elements, thoughts to leave, the searching for another job, and the intention to leave an organisation. Alam and Asim (2019) further contest that turnover intention is reduced if an employee feels supported by senior members of that organisation, and when the employee learns the culture of that organisation.

A study completed by Ward, Beal, Zyphur, Zhang, and Bobko (2022) underscores that departments with unsupportive diversity culture exhibit stronger negative effects on trust and increased turnover intentions. Turnover is significantly affected by

diversity culture perceptions (Ward et al., 2022). Ward et al. (2022) posit that positive job attitudes in units perceived to value diversity motivate employees to stay and that, conversely, an unsupportive diversity climate can increase turnover by alienating employees who value diversity, reinforcing a negative culture and exacerbating turnover. The role of a supportive diversity culture in reducing turnover and fostering organisational trust is extremely critical (Ward et al., 2022). The study by Ward et al. (2022) emphasizes the need for organisations to understand and address the multilevel and dynamic nature of diversity culture and trust to mitigate turnover intentions effectively.

The existing literature provides limited insights into women's perceptions of organisational culture, particularly in relation to the efforts aimed at enhancing gender DEI through existing policies and the potential resistance encountered from male-dominated management structures. While this research does not primarily focus on addressing turnover intentions, it seeks to explore how DEI policies are perceived by women in manufacturing organisations. Specifically, it aims to investigate how these perceptions are shaped by the cultural norms and espoused values that contribute to the continued underrepresentation of women in management roles. Furthermore, the study will examine how the experienced organisational culture, as opposed to the espoused values and visible artifacts, may influence women's turnover intentions within these organisations.

2.6.1 Factors Contributing to High Turnover Rates

High turnover rates among women in the manufacturing industry pose significant barriers to achieving gender diversity and sustained workforce balance. These turnover rates can be attributed to a complex interplay of cultural, structural, and individual factors that underscore a misalignment between diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and their effective implementation (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020). According to Ward et al., (2022), a notable driver of turnover is the perceived inconsistency between an organisation’s DEI initiatives and its embedded cultural practices. When women perceive DEI efforts as mere symbolic gestures rather than genuine, organisation-wide commitments, frustration and disengagement often ensue, precipitating higher attrition rates (Ward et al., 2022). This perception undermines trust and signals a lack of substantive support, prompting women to seek employment in more inclusive environments where career progression pathways are transparent and achievable (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020).

Eagly and Karau's (2002) posit that women in leadership face conflict when expected to embody traditionally masculine traits, which may not align with their authentic leadership styles. This incongruity fosters an environment where women feel pressured to compromise their identities, resulting in reduced job satisfaction and increased turnover (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Persistent stereotypes, such as the notion that women are less suited for technical or high-stakes roles, compound this issue by perpetuating exclusion and limiting opportunities for advancement (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Such stereotypes not only reinforce biases but also contribute to a systemic culture of marginalisation that discourages female participation sectors such as manufacturing (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

Cortina and Areguin (2021) have identified sexual harassment in the workplace as a key issue for attrition amongst women. Sexual harassment is more than an individual behavioural issue, it is deeply embedded within the underlying assumptions of organisational culture, particularly in male-dominated industries (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). At this deepest level of culture, sexual harassment is normalized, trivialized, or even weaponized as a tool for reinforcing gender hierarchies and maintaining male dominance in professional spaces (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). Folke and Rickne (2022) echo these sentiments and further argue that organisations where harassment is pervasive often operate under implicit cultural assumptions that tolerate or excuse inappropriate behaviour**,** framing it as a mere consequence of gender integration in the workplace. This not only discourages women from reporting incidents due to fear of retaliation or career stagnation but also fosters a hostile work environment that leads to increased attrition among female employees (Folke & Rickne, 2022). Over time, this pattern reinforces gender segregation in the workforce, as women self-select out of industries where they perceive an increased risk of harm and exclusion (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). Consequently, without systemic cultural change that addresses these underlying assumptions and disrupts the normalization of harassment**,** organisations risk perpetuating a cycle of gendered attrition that undermines DEI efforts (Cortina & Areguin, 2021).

2.6.2 Work-Life Balance and Support Systems

The demanding nature of manufacturing roles, characterised by inflexible schedules and long working hours, disproportionately impacts women, especially those balancing professional duties with caregiving responsibilities (Tsen, Gu, Tan, & Goh,

2021). This structural rigidity often leads to stress and burnout, factors that significantly increase the probability of voluntary turnover (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020). The absence of robust family-friendly policies, such as on-site childcare and comprehensive parental leave, further compounds the challenge by placing additional strain on women (Yadav & Sharma, 2023).

Mentorship and sponsorship programs have been shown to be crucial in supporting women's career development and mitigating turnover (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Women who have access to mentors and sponsors are better positioned to navigate the unique challenges of their roles and feel more valued within their organisations (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). The absence or poor execution of these programs, however, can lead to feelings of isolation, reduced morale, and increased attrition rates. Without mentors who advocate for their growth, women often struggle to see a clear path forward within the industry, which impacts both retention and engagement (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020).

2.6.3 The Impact of Organisational Culture on Retention

Organisational culture is a pivotal determinant of retention rates among women in the manufacturing sector (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Schein's model of organisational culture underscores the critical alignment needed between artifacts (e.g., visible DEI policies), espoused values, and underlying assumptions. The underlying assumptions of an organisation, deeply held beliefs that may remain unspoken, can either support or undermine the effectiveness of DEI policies (Boulware et al., 2022).

Leadership plays a central role in shaping and reinforcing an inclusive organisational culture (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020). Research by Tran (2021) emphasises that leaders who consistently champion and embody inclusive values create an environment where women feel recognised and supported. Conversely, the absence of visible leadership commitment to DEI signals to women that their development and well-being are not organisational priorities, contributing to higher turnover rates (Ng & Sears, 2020). Leaders must, therefore, ensure that their actions reflect a genuine commitment to fostering an inclusive culture that aligns with formal policies (Ng & Sears, 2020).

2.6.4 Strategies for Improving Retention

Addressing retention challenges requires a comprehensive approach that considers both structural and cultural dimensions (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020). Implementing

structured mentorship and sponsorship programs is a proven strategy to support women's career trajectories (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). These programs should prioritise building sustained relationships that bolster women's professional development and confidence (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020). Effective mentorship not only offers guidance but also fosters a sense of belonging, which can significantly enhance retention (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021).

Flexible work policies are equally essential to support work-life balance and reduce stress-related turnover (Tran, 2021). Initiatives such as flexible hours, remote work, and extensive parental leave policies must be integrated into the organisational culture to normalise their use without penalty (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020). Embedding these policies within a supportive cultural framework ensures that employees feel empowered to prioritise their well-being without fearing negative career repercussions (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020). Furthermore this leads to a perception of a psychologically safe environment, which Clark (2020) contends that is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment.

Regular cultural audits are another vital tool for identifying gaps between DEI policy and practice (Ely & Thomas, 2020). These audits facilitate a feedback loop that helps organisations pinpoint areas for improvement, ensuring that stated values align with lived experiences (Ely & Thomas, 2020). Continuous assessment and adjustment reinforce a culture of accountability and inclusivity (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020).

Finally, leadership development programs focused on inclusive practices can drive cultural transformation (Tran, 2021). Training leaders to identify and mitigate unconscious biases, promote inclusive team dynamics, and actively champion diversity creates an environment where women feel empowered and valued (Tran, 2021).

2.7 Literature Summary

The manufacturing sector's ongoing struggle to achieve gender diversity is a multifaceted challenge deeply embedded within entrenched cultural norms and structural impediments. This literature review has rigorously applied Schein's (2010) model of organisational culture, complemented by Ely and Meyerson's (2000) transformational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) approaches, to elucidate the intricate dynamics between organisational culture and gender diversity. Such an

integrated approach underscores the need to dissect how each level of culture, artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions, shapes and informs women's perceptions of DEI initiatives (Schein, 2010).

Central to bridging the persistent disconnect between DEI policy and its practical implementation is a deeper examination of cultural assumptions that perpetuate gender stereotypes (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). As suggested by Ely and Meyerson (2000), transformational approaches that not only focus on surface-level interventions but also challenge the status quo at its core are pivotal. It is crucial to align espoused values with tangible behaviours that reflect a genuine commitment to inclusivity (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Embedding DEI strategies at all levels of the organisational culture ensures that these initiatives are perceived as authentic rather than symbolic, enhancing their effectiveness and impact (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020).

The synthesis of this literature further identifies leadership commitment as a cornerstone for driving cultural change (Ng & Sears, 2020). Targeted training and development programs that address unconscious biases, mentorship and sponsorship initiatives aimed at empowering women, and flexible policy reforms are critical strategies for fostering a more inclusive workplace (Tran, 2021). Regular cultural audits are recommended to ensure that these DEI efforts are continuously aligned with the evolving organisational climate and workforce expectations (Ely & Thomas, 2020).

Despite advancements, significant research gaps persist, notably in understanding the nuanced, often unconscious cultural assumptions that hinder gender diversity. Furthermore, intersectional challenges, such as the compounded effects of race, class, and other identity markers on gender, remain underexplored. Future studies should prioritise longitudinal research to measure the sustained impact of DEI initiatives and the transformative potential of deeply embedded cultural change (Boulware et al., 2022).

By adopting a comprehensive and integrated approach, organisations can lay the groundwork for an inclusive environment that not only supports the retention and advancement of women but also enhances overall performance and sustainability (Simionescu et al., 2021). The manufacturing sector's path toward a more equitable future hinges on sustained leadership commitment, strategic DEI embedding, and a readiness to challenge and reconfigure long-standing cultural assumptions. Such

transformation is essential for fostering an industry that values diversity as a driver of innovation and resilience.

The literature reviewed underscores the pivotal role of organisational culture in shaping the experiences and career trajectories of women in the manufacturing sector. Schein's (2010) model highlights how culture operates at multiple levels, artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions, each influencing how gender DEI initiatives are perceived and enacted. Studies by Ely and Meyerson (2000) and Gherardi (1994) illustrate that while many organisations have implemented DEI policies, the persistence of deeply embedded cultural norms often undermines their effectiveness, leading to subtle biases and structural barriers that hinder women's progression. The literature also reveals that the perceived authenticity of gender diversity initiatives significantly impacts women's trust in their organisations and their sense of belonging (Heilman, Caleo, & Manzi, 2024). Furthermore, research suggests that misalignment between stated DEI commitments and actual cultural practices can contribute to higher turnover rates among women in male-dominated industries (Ward et al., 2022).

Building on the insights of the literature review, Chapter 3 outlines the key research questions that have been developed to guide this study. By investigating these dimensions, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the interplay between organisational culture and gender inclusivity, ultimately contributing to more effective strategies for fostering sustainable gender equity in manufacturing leadership.

Chapter 3: Research Questions

The aim of this research is to investigate how organisational culture within the manufacturing industry is experienced by women in managerial roles and to understand their perspectives on how effectively organisations are addressing the issue of creating a more gender-inclusive culture.

RQ1 - How do women managers in manufacturing experience their organisational culture?

The first research question seeks to explore the subjective experiences of women managers within manufacturing environments. This inquiry is significant as it delves into the everyday realities faced by these women and how they navigate the implicit and explicit cultural norms of their organisations. The literature indicates that organisational culture plays a crucial role in shaping employees' job satisfaction, sense of belonging, and professional growth (Schein, 2010). For women in management, these experiences are often shaped by cultural practices that may unconsciously favour male counterparts, leading to subtle forms of gender bias and microaggressions (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Understanding these dynamics helps illuminate how existing organisational cultural frameworks support or hinder gender equity at senior levels and highlights areas that require transformation to foster inclusivity.

RQ2 - How do women managers perceive the effectiveness of gender diversity initiatives in creating a more inclusive organisational culture?

The second research question focuses on evaluating the perceived impact of gender diversity initiatives within manufacturing organisations. This is important because diversity policies and programs are often developed to address gender imbalances and promote inclusive environments; however, their effectiveness can vary widely based on implementation and organisational commitment (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). Women’s perspectives provide valuable insight into whether these initiatives translate into real change or remain symbolic gestures. Based on the literature reviewed this question also aims to capture how these programs influence women’s sense of agency, trust in leadership, and belief in fair treatment, which are essential for fostering a culture that truly values diversity (Heilman, 2012).

RQ3 - How do women's perceptions of the gender inclusivity of the organisational culture influence their intention to leave or stay?

The third research question explores the relationship between women's perceptions of gender inclusivity and their career intentions—whether they decide to stay within or leave their organisations. Research suggests that perceived inclusivity is closely linked to employee retention, particularly for underrepresented groups (Ward et al., 2022). Women managers often face unique challenges such as limited mentorship, exclusion from informal networks, and the need to continuously prove their competence, which can impact their decision to remain or seek opportunities elsewhere (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020). By examining these perceptions, the study seeks to understand how the inclusivity of an organisation's culture contributes to broader talent retention strategies and how organisations can better support female leaders in their career trajectories.

Each of these research questions is designed to address specific gaps in the existing literature by focusing on the nuanced ways in which organisational culture, diversity initiatives, and perceptions of inclusivity influence the experiences and career decisions of women managers in the manufacturing sector. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and structural elements that support or hinder gender diversity at leadership levels, thereby contributing to actionable strategies for fostering inclusive and equitable workplaces.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology that was employed in this study, providing a detailed description of the research design, philosophical approach, data collection methods, and analytical framework. The primary objective of this research was to explore the influence of organisational culture on women's perceptions of gender DEI initiatives within the manufacturing sector. Given the complexity of these experiences and the contextual factors influencing them, a qualitative, exploratory research approach was deemed the most appropriate (Williams & Moser, 2019). This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences through semi-structured interviews, enabling a nuanced understanding of the organisational dynamics that shape gender inclusivity (Naima, 2016).

4.2 Research Design

The research design serves as the foundational framework that structures the study's methodological approach and ensures the alignment of data collection and analysis with the research objectives. According to Olawale, Chinagozi, and Joe (2023), exploratory research is particularly effective when seeking to gain new insights into a phenomenon by examining it from different perspectives and uncovering patterns not previously considered. This design was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of how women in middle and senior management positions navigate workplace culture and gender inclusivity (Olawale et al., 2023). Furthermore, Saunders and Lewis (2017) discuss that the most common ways of conducting such research is through the combination of the search through literature, and the use of unstructured observations, and using semi- and unstructured interviews. This study followed a qualitative methodology using semi structured interviews to collect data from women on their experiences of organisational culture and gender inclusivity. It then uses a thematic analysis to gain new insights which can be added to the already existing body of knowledge in accordance with an exploratory research design (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

The research philosophy adopted for the completion of this study was interpretivism. The nature of the study is subjective, as it follows a line of questioning that seeks

understanding of the perceptions of the people that will be interviewed, and as such an interpretivist philosophy was apt for the completion of the study (Van Der Walt, 2020). Furthermore the methodology was of a qualitative nature and as the study generalised data collected in order to deepen theoretical understanding (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Williams and Moser (2019) concur with this sentiment and state that qualitative research provides the opportunity to understand a phenomenon in order to be able to explore reasons that it would reoccur.

The approach to the theory developed was one of an inductive nature. Vears and Gilliam (2022) explain that when the nature of the study seeks to use specific observations to identify patterns and themes, which is then be analysed to formulate generalised theories or conceptual frameworks, then the approach is inductive. Inductive research focusses on the close understanding of the research context, and is more flexible in structure to allow for changes in the emphasis of the research as the research process progresses (Vears & Gilliam, 2022). As this study used perceptions of the individuals in the organisations to formulate themes, there was a wide range of possibilities for the extent of the responses, and thus the extent of the generalisations that were made (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). This made the inductive approach the best suited for the completion of this study (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019).

4.3 Population

The population identified for this study was women managers in manufacturing organisations in South Africa to get their perspective in terms of the cultural norms within the organisation which they perceive to either promote or stifle the gender diversity redress process and ascertain whether these may lead to turnover intentions. The selection of the interviewees was limited to women in management, in order to fully understand the perceptions from their perspectives. In an exploratory study conducted by Naima (2016) on the role of gender diversity in organisational effectiveness, the researcher employed a qualitative approach by interviewing six senior management employees, with each interview lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. Additionally, Naima (2016) facilitated a focus group discussion involving eight middle to lower management employees to further explore the topic. Following the approach used by Naima (2016), the identification of the study population in the

current research will similarly focus on women in middle and senior management in their organisations. However, only semi-structured interviews were used and these continued until data saturation was achieved, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

4.4 Unit of Analysis

As this is an explorative qualitative study, it was necessary to get the first-hand experience and perception of the individuals who lead in manufacturing organisations and have day to day interaction with the organisational culture, but who are not the key decision makers in the organisation (Olawale et al., 2023). Naima (2016) concurs with this, as explorative studies require an in depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of individuals in order to add to theory. The unit of analysis was women at middle and senior management levels in manufacturing organisations.

4.5 Sampling Method and Size

Sampling was based on the relevance of the sample to the nature of the study. As the study argues that there is a gender diversity gap at various levels but particularly in senior management level in the manufacturing industry, the researcher sought to sample as many women as possible at a senior management level in order to understand whether this gap is seen and is being addressed. Given the premise of this study that a gender gap exists at this particular Organisational level, the research included middle management women working in various manufacturing industry sectors across a varying age diversity who have been in the industry for over 10 years. This duration was deemed appropriate as it allows these women to have experienced and observed various aspects of their organisation's culture over time. Their extensive experience provided a nuanced and insightful understanding of the cultural dynamics within their organisations, thereby offering a discerning description of their perceptions regarding these dynamics. It is important to acknowledge that at the time of the interviews, one participant had eight years of experience in the sector. However, given their senior position within their organisation, the researcher determined that they possessed sufficient expertise and industry knowledge to contribute meaningfully to the study. Consequently, their inclusion was deemed appropriate within the research framework. As there was

currently no information for how many employees are at each different level in the organisations, the method of sampling was a purposive non-probability sampling, as there was no way to definitively ascertain the probability of an individual or group being selected (Etikan, Mussa & Alkassim, 2016).

Etikan et al. (2016) argue that if the nature of the study is qualitative, then the purposive non-probability sampling method is apt for the completion of the data gathering process. The researcher selected the sample using their judgement on the suitability of the sample to provide the information required for the outcomes required for this study, and as such the method of sampling was be purposive non-probability method (Busetto & Wick & Gumbinger, 2020). The researcher also used snowball sampling by using their networks and those of their colleagues to suggest ideal candidates to conduct semi-structured interviews with, to be able to collect data from as many relevant individuals as possible, however the researcher used judgement, to ensure that the snowball referrals were not random, but add value to the outcomes of the research (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). Middle to large sized organisations were used for the sampling. Middle to large-sized organisations were selected for this study due to their perceived established organisational structures, policies, and hierarchical complexity, which provide a richer context for examining gender diversity and inclusion. These organisations typically have formal DEI initiatives, allowing for an analysis of both policy implementation and practical experiences. Additionally, larger organisations tend to be perceived to have more defined leadership pipelines, making it possible to assess career progression barriers and retention strategies for women in management. The inclusion of middle-sized organisations ensures diversity in perspectives, capturing insights from companies in different stages of DEI maturity, while large corporations offer a broader view of systemic issues and long-term trends in gender inclusivity.

The study continued with the interview process until all new observations show little to no new relevant new information, and the researcher deemed saturation to have been reached (Busetto et al., 2020). Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi (2017) have described two types of saturation that can be reached which are namely code saturation (when the researcher has reached a point of hearing all) and meaning saturation (when the researcher has reached a point of understanding all the interviewees have articulated. Hennink et al., (2017) explain that code saturation is

the point at which no new data, or codes or variations in theory can be identified in the interview process. For this research interviews were carried out until this point of code saturation was reached in the information gathering process. Johnson, Adkins and Chauvin (2020) have argued that the size of the sample is affected by how many interviews will have to be conducted until saturation has been reached. Sebele-Mpofu (2020) argues that the point of saturation in qualitative research can vary depending on the type of saturation being pursued by the researcher. According to Hennink et al. (2017) several studies on this subject, argue that the number of interviews required to reach this type of saturation typically ranges between 6 and 16, though Hennink et al. (2017) suggest that saturation can often be achieved with approximately 9 interviews. In alignment with this approach, the study conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with women in middle and senior management positions within manufacturing organisations. It must be noted that saturation was reached after 10 interviews had been completed, however the researcher conducted a further two interviews for thoroughness. This saturation is in line with Hennink et al. (2017), who argues that 'meaning saturation' is the point at which no more rich or meaningful data can be extracted from the participants.

4.6 Measurement Instrument

The measurement instrument for qualitative data gathering process was an interview guide. The research questions raised in Chapter 3 were used to compile an interview guide, where a set number of questions were formulated which relate to extracting as much quality information as possible, such that this study can provide valuable outcomes that can be added to the existing body of theory available. As this was an explorative study, the nature of the questions in the interview guide were of a nature that sought to gain understanding by going through the depth of the interviewees perceptions and experiences, in order to gather as much insight as possible (Roberts, 2020). The interview guide provided some structure to the interview process, in order to keep the focus of the interview process to collecting information pertaining to the research questions, and as such the quality of the outcomes of the study, relies heavily on the quality of the interview guide (Roberts, 2020). The interview guide was subjected to a pilot test interview to assess the clarity and unambiguity of the questions posed, as well as to evaluate the feasibility of the intended interview duration. The researcher aimed for each interview to last

approximately 60 minutes, ensuring that participants had sufficient time to provide detailed and comprehensive responses (Naima, 2016). Following the completion of the pilot test, the researcher confirmed that the interview guide met both criteria effectively, demonstrating its suitability for the study. Consequently, the data collection process proceeded as planned. Appendix A provides a copy of the Interview guide that was used to conduct the semi structured interviews for the collection of the data.

4.7 Data Gathering Process

When a study aims to gather information on a particular topic in order to enable theory development, through the first accounts and experiences of the participants, then the use of semi-structured interviews, is the best way to collect this data (Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi & Syam, 2022). This study was one that requires individual's to give an account of their perceptions and experiences, and as such, in-line with the recommendations of Saunders and Lewis (2017), the study used semi-structured interviews to collect the data. Participants were identified through the researcher's professional network and selected based on predefined sampling criteria. They were subsequently contacted via telephone or email to invite their participation in the study. Upon confirming their willingness to participate, respondents were provided with an informed consent form, along with a meeting link for the scheduled interview.

The interviews were conducted virtually, which facilitated recording for accurate transcription and enhanced logistical flexibility in scheduling. This approach ensured that participants could engage in the study without geographical constraints, thereby improving the feasibility of data collection while maintaining ethical research practices. The interviews were conducted through a process where the researcher used a set of general questions about the themes organisational culture and gender diversity, however the order of the questions were not strictly be kept, and some questions were omitted, dependant on the direction that the interview takes. This method was in-line with the measurement instrument recommended by Ruslin et al. (2022) of the way in which semi-structured interviews are conducted. Furthermore Ruslin et al. (2022) also posit that the use of interviews is the correct method of collecting qualitative data, and as such this is the required method to use for this qualitative study. Given that the researcher is a male, it is acknowledged that

potential gender-based biases could have emerged during the data collection process (Busetto et al., 2020). These biases may stem from preconceived notions, implicit assumptions, or differences in lived experiences between the researcher and the study participants (Busetto et al., 2020). Recognizing the potential for the researcher to influence the study, rigorous measures were implemented to mitigate any adverse impact on data integrity and validity. To uphold the credibility and reliability of the qualitative research process, the researcher adhered to established qualitative research guidelines and ethical best practices as outlined in chapter 4.9**.** This included maintaining researcher reflexivity, which involved continuous self-assessment and critical reflection on potential biases throughout the study (Yadav, 2022). Additionally, a neutral and open-ended questioning approach was adopted during interviews to ensure that participants' narratives were captured authentically, without undue influence from the researcher's perspectives. Furthermore, the interview protocol was designed to minimize leading questions, and participant responses were analysed using a thematic approach to allow patterns and insights to emerge inductively from the data, rather than being shaped by the researcher's own assumptions. Where necessary, peer debriefing and intercoder reliability checks were conducted to further enhance the objectivity and trustworthiness of the findings (Yadav, 2022). By implementing these strategies, the researcher aimed to mitigate the influence of gender-related biases and ensure that the study findings accurately reflect the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Data collection proceeded until the completion of the 12th interview, at which point no new codes emerged during the data analysis process (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). Data saturation was reached following the 10th interview, as no new codes were identified in the 10th interview (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). However, given that two additional interviews had already been scheduled, the data collection process continued as planned. The findings from the 11th and 12th interviews further confirmed that saturation had been achieved, as no additional themes or codes were generated (Busetto et al., 2020. This alignment with theoretical saturation principles ensured that the data collected was comprehensive, reliable, and sufficient to support the study's objectives.

4.8 Analysis Approach

Interviews were meticulously recorded to ensure an accurate and comprehensive capture of the data collected during the research process (Johnson et al., 2020). The recording of interviews was crucial step in preserving the integrity of the data and allowing for a thorough analysis (Johnson et al., 2020). Once recorded, these interviews were transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed examination. Transcription involves converting the audio recordings into written text, providing a permanent and analysable record of the spoken responses and interactions (McMullin, 2023). This process was essential for ensuring that the nuances and specifics of the participants' responses are preserved and accessible for subsequent analysis.

Both the field notes and the transcribed interviews were employed in the analytical phase of the research. Field notes, which encompass observations made during the interviews and other contextual insights, complemented the transcribed data by providing additional layers of meaning and understanding (McMullin, 2023). These notes were used to capture non-verbal cues, environmental context, and researcher reflections that were not always evident in the transcriptions alone. The integration of field notes with interview transcriptions allows for a richer and more nuanced analysis of the information gathered (Johnson et al., 2020). By cross-referencing these sources, the research aimed to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the interview data, ensuring a robust and multidimensional approach to data analysis.

The analysis approach for this study followed the method advanced by Williams and Moser (2019) which suggests that for qualitative data, real world experiences will be used to develop codes, from which relationships will be established, and these will be used to put these codes into particular categories. These categories were used to formulate themes, which were then used to develop theory that the study aims to put forward to add to the existing body of literature (Williams and Moser, 2019). Christou (2022) discusses that a thematic analysis is used for qualitative studies where the themes for the study are identified and analysed for interpretation. This research thus adopted a thematic analysis approach for the analysis of the data gathered. Sebele-Mpofu (2020) discusses that when studying human experience through feelings, perceptions and cognitions, then a phenomenological approach, is the best qualitative design approach for the research. This method is congruent with

the inductive research approach, which seeks to use experiences or phenomena to add onto and build theory (Saunders & Lewis, 2017).

4.8.1 Thematic Analysis Process

The thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase process proposed by Clarke and Braun (2013), ensuring a rigorous and structured approach to data interpretation:

Familiarisation with the Data - The researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim and thoroughly read through each transcript multiple times to immerse themselves in the data. This step helped in identifying initial patterns and notable insights.

Generating Initial Codes - Using Atlas.ti, the researcher systematically coded the data by highlighting meaningful excerpts from the transcripts. Coding was conducted inductively, meaning that themes were derived directly from the data rather than imposed based on pre-existing theories. The software enabled the researcher to attach multiple codes to relevant text segments, improving the ability to track patterns and relationships across the dataset. Codes were assigned to words, phrases, and passages that reflected important aspects of participants' experiences related to organisational culture and gender inclusivity.

Searching for Themes - The generated codes were then grouped into broader themes that represented recurring patterns across the data. Atlas.ti facilitated this process by allowing the researcher to create thematic networks, visually mapping relationships between codes and categories. This step involved organising related codes into categories that encapsulated key issues affecting women’s experiences in manufacturing organisations.

Reviewing Themes - The researcher reviewed and refined the themes to ensure they accurately represented the data. This involved checking whether the themes were coherent, sufficiently distinct, and supported by multiple data points. Any overlapping themes were either merged or redefined for clarity. Atlas.ti's analytical tools assisted in this process by providing frequency reports on coded excerpts, enabling the researcher to determine the most salient themes.

Defining and Naming Themes - Each theme was clearly defined and given a concise, descriptive name that captured its essence. At this stage, sub-themes were also identified to provide a more granular understanding of specific issues. Atlas.ti

was used to create detailed thematic frameworks that allowed for a structured comparison of participant perspectives.

Producing the Report - The final stage involved integrating the themes into the research findings, with supporting participant quotes used to illustrate each theme's significance. Atlas.ti's report generation tools were used to extract relevant coded data and organise it systematically for presentation. The themes were then interpreted within the broader context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

4.8.2 Coding Process

The coding process was iterative and involved multiple rounds of refinement to ensure reliability and validity. Initially, an open coding approach was used, where data segments were assigned descriptive labels without predefined categories. Atlas.ti facilitated this by allowing for real-time coding adjustments and flexible categorisation. As coding progressed, a focused coding approach was applied to group similar codes into higher-order categories. Finally, axial coding was used to establish relationships between themes, allowing for a deeper exploration of how organisational culture influenced women's perceptions of gender inclusivity.

The researcher ensured that coding was conducted systematically, with a codebook maintained to track definitions, variations, and examples of each code. Atlas.ti's memo and annotation features were used to document coding decisions, ensuring consistency in analysis and minimising subjective bias. Throughout the process, the researcher engaged in peer debriefing sessions to validate coding decisions and refine thematic interpretations.

By employing this structured thematic analysis and coding process, the study was able to derive rich, meaningful insights that contribute to the understanding of gender diversity and inclusion in manufacturing organisations

4.9 Quality Controls

Explorative qualitative research relies heavily on the experiences and perceptions of the interviewees and is therefore not subject to traditional research verification methods used by quantitative researchers (Yadav, 2022). Established quality

controls to ensure the reliability of the research were applied as recommended by Yadav (2022).

An interview guide was developed which aimed at keeping the focus of the interview to being able to answer the research questions (Roberts, 2020). Interviews were then recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to keep the essence of what was said, such that accurate coding can be completed (Ruslin et al., 2022).

Furthermore, field notes were kept in order to remind the interviewer of some of the highlights of the points that were raised in interviews, and these notes were digitised to ensure that records are not lost. Interviews were prolonged to ensure that the interviewees do not feel rushed, and can respond to the questions adequately (Naima, 2016). The aim was to ensure that the interviews were at least 45 minutes long, and this was achieved throughout all the interviews (Naima, 2016). The researcher's supervisor was actively involved in critical phases of the data collection process to enhance the reliability of the findings, given the researcher’s limited experience.

A further measure of quality control was how purposive sampling was conducted, in order to have the best possible candidates for interviews, such that the information gathered from these interviews is transferable to theory (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024).
The researcher reflected and took note of his own gender biases which may have stemmed from preconceived notions, and the fact that as an African male leader working in manufacturing, his lived experiences may differ from those of the participants (Busetto et al., 2020). Given these differences the researcher mitigated potential bias by employing open-ended questioning techniques, ensuring that participants' responses were not influenced by leading prompts. Additionally, the researcher engaged in regular self-assessment practices to identify and minimize implicit biases (Busetto et al., 2020). This process aimed to maintain objectivity and analytical rigor in the interpretation of participants' responses, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study’s findings.
Throughout the research process, the researcher held six meetings with the supervisor, during which various quality control measures were implemented. These meetings also provided an opportunity for the researcher to seek guidance on areas

of uncertainty due to limited experience (Yadav, 2022). This engagement was essential in ensuring the overall credibility of the study.

4.10 Limitations

Due to time and resource constraints, the researcher was limited on the number of interviews that can be conducted, however, this did not compromise the integrity of the research, as data (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020) was achieved after ten interviews, indicating that no new themes or insights emerged beyond this point. Consequently, the number of interviews conducted was deemed methodologically sufficient to address the study's objectives.

Furthermore, this study is based on the premise that there is a limited amount of women in management, and as such access to women in management was limited to only a few firms across the manufacturing industry, and as such there is still scope to broaden the study to a wider variety of organisations in the South African Manufacturing sector.

The researcher is also inexperienced in the field and in the process of research, and as such acknowledges that this may affect how interviews were conducted and analysed. Qualitative research is susceptible to the biases of the researcher, and the lens through which the researcher has interpreted the data (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). In order to limit the effect of these limitations, the researcher used the experience of their supervisor to review the interview guide and coding process, such that these processes displayed the highest level reliability and limit the effect of the constraints and lack of experience.

The study relies on participants' self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by personal perceptions, memory recall, and individual biases. Participants may have modified their responses to align with organisational expectations, particularly given the sensitive nature of workplace DEI discussions. Additionally, women in middle and senior management roles may have been reluctant to openly critique their organisations due to potential career implications. It was thus important for the researcher to make sure that confidentiality is explained well, and trust is maintained in order for the participants to feel that they can speak freely, without the possibility of being exposed.

While the study explores gender and organisational culture, it does not fully account for the influence of intersecting identities, such as race, age, socio-economic background, and educational level, which are critical to understanding perceptions of DEI initiatives. Lastly due to time constraints, a longitudinal study examining the evolution of DEI initiatives over an extended period was not possible. A cross-sectional study limits the ability to track the long-term impact of organisational culture changes on women's career progression.

Despite these limitations, the study provides critical contributions to the understanding of gender DEI initiatives in manufacturing and offers a foundation for future research that could address these constraints through broader sampling, longitudinal designs, and mixed-method approaches.

Chapter 5: Results

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study, structured according to the thematic analysis conducted on the data collected from semi-structured interviews with women in manufacturing leadership. The thematic analysis approach was chosen due to its ability to identify patterns and themes that provide deep insights into participants' experiences and perceptions regarding organisational culture and gender diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

A key aspect of this chapter is the integration of participant narratives to illustrate the complexity of gender DEI experiences within manufacturing. The findings are directly linked to the research questions and interpreted critically to assess how organisational culture either fosters or hinders gender diversity efforts. The results presented here will not only provide evidence to support or refute existing literature but will also contribute to a deeper understanding of the nuanced ways in which organisational structures and cultural dynamics shape women's experiences in manufacturing leadership.

5.1.1 Overview of Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to analyse patterns (themes) within data. It enabled the researcher to capture the richness of participants' lived experiences while systematically categorising recurring ideas. Unlike other qualitative analysis methods such as content analysis, which focuses on quantifying words or phrases and using predetermined codes, thematic analysis provides a more flexible approach to uncover underlying meanings within textual data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Clark and Baun (2013) define thematic analysis as a process that involves systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning across a dataset. It is widely used in qualitative research because of its adaptability, allowing researchers to work within different theoretical frameworks (Clarke & Braun, 2013). In this study, thematic analysis is particularly well-suited as it helps to explore how women perceive DEI initiatives in manufacturing and how these perceptions are influenced by the broader organisational culture.

For this study, thematic analysis was conducted utilizing Atlas.ti software to systematically code and categorize participant responses. Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive examination of the methodological steps undertaken in the Atlas.ti analysis process, detailing the systematic approach employed to conduct the thematic analysis.

5.1.2 Justification for Thematic Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis instead of alternative qualitative data analysis methods, for several key reasons as stated below:

- Flexibility - Thematic analysis does not require adherence to a strict theoretical approach, making it highly adaptable for exploring perceptions and lived experiences.
- Applicability to Organisational Studies - The approach allows for a nuanced understanding of workplace culture and gender-related experiences, which aligns well with the research focus on organisational culture and DEI initiatives.
- Ability to Capture Subjective Experiences - The study aims to understand how women interpret their experiences in manufacturing leadership, making thematic analysis a robust tool for capturing the complexity of individual and shared experiences.

5.1.3 Thematic Analysis and Interpretivism

Thematic analysis aligns well with the interpretivist paradigm in qualitative research, which posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective experiences of individuals (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Interpretivism emphasizes understanding the meaning that individuals ascribe to their experiences, and thematic analysis provides a systematic method for identifying and interpreting these meanings within qualitative data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). By focusing on patterns and themes that emerge from participants' narratives, researchers can construct a nuanced understanding of the social phenomena under study.

5.1.4 Addressing Research Questions Through Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was instrumental in answering the research questions by enabling the identification of patterns across participant narratives. Each theme presented in this chapter was constructed in response to the following research questions:

- Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do women managers in manufacturing experience their organisational culture? This question was addressed by themes reflecting exclusion, bias, and structural barriers.
- Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do women managers perceive the effectiveness of gender diversity initiatives in creating a more inclusive organisational culture? The analysis identified organisational resistance, lack of mentorship, informal networking exclusion, and lack of implementation strategies as some of the key obstacles.
- Research Question 3 (RQ3): How do women's perceptions of the gender inclusivity of the organisational culture influence their intention to leave or stay? The findings suggest that leadership accountability, structured sponsorship programs, structured career path communication, growth opportunities and cultural transformation efforts are essential interventions.

A total of 64 unique codes (See Appendix B for complete code list) were generated across the dataset and categorised into 9 dominant themes, each of which will be explored in detail in subsequent sections. Table 1 below presents the thematic analysis derived from qualitative data, illustrating key themes related to women's experiences in the manufacturing sector. The table categorizes findings according to research questions, highlighting recurring themes that emerged from participant responses. Each theme is supported by a description that encapsulates its significance, alongside representative quotes that provide firsthand insights into the lived experiences of women in this industry. The inclusion of code numbers links the themes to specific interview excerpts, ensuring transparency in the coding process. The identified themes underscore the systemic challenges women face in achieving gender equity in manufacturing. This thematic structure facilitates a deeper understanding of the factors influencing perceptions of DEI initiatives and provides a foundation for further analysis of organisational culture's role in shaping these experiences.

Research Question	Theme	Theme Description	Code Number	Quote example	Organizational Culture Implication
RQ1	1. Gendered Workplace Norms & Resistance to Inclusion	The manufacturing industry has historically been male-dominated, resulting in cultural norms that often favour male employees. Women managers face challenges related to gender stereotyping, exclusion from leadership roles, and the need to conform to masculine workplace norms. These barriers reinforce systemic inequalities, limiting the full participation of women in managerial positions.	3, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13	you were really kind of pre warned to say that listen, this is a man's field. So be prepared that not everybody is going to be very welcoming. And make sure that you play your part as well to get the job done (P3)	Deeply embedded masculine norms shape work expectations, making it difficult for women to challenge gender biases or progress in leadership.
RQ1	2. The 'Boys' Club' Culture & Women's Limited Access to Networks	Informal networks, such as mentorship circles, after-hours gatherings, and informal decision-making forums, play a crucial role in career advancement. Women managers often find themselves excluded from these spaces, limiting their ability to access high-impact mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. This exclusion reinforces the glass ceiling effect, making upward mobility more challenging for women.	2, 5	And because it's an environment that has a lot of guys, you'd find my my boss taking the guys out for drinks and not having extended an invite to me (P10)	Informal exclusion limits women's ability to access career-advancing relationships, reinforcing leadership inequalities.
RQ2	3. Superficial vs. Structural DEI: Women's Role in Organizational Change	Many organizations implement gender diversity initiatives to meet compliance standards rather than to foster genuine inclusivity. Tokenism occurs when women are placed in leadership roles without the necessary support structures, making it difficult for them to influence meaningful change. As a result, women managers may perceive these initiatives as superficial, lacking the depth needed to address structural gender inequalities.	14, 16, 18, 28, 29, 30, 33	you still have male leaders and, um, you still have those subtleties where in a meeting, uh, a lady will say, this is what I'm proposing, or this is an idea that I have, or what have you. And, um, it will kind of be not taken. And then as soon as, Um, Guatemala says something and it's like, That's a fantastic idea. (P2)	DEI efforts focus on numerical representation without addressing biases that prevent women from leading meaningful change.
RQ2	4. Performative DEI & the Disconnect Between Policy and Practice	While many manufacturing organizations have publicly committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), women managers report that these commitments do not always translate into meaningful workplace change. Implicit biases, microaggressions, and the persistence of traditional gender roles create a gap between stated organizational values and everyday experiences. This disconnect can lead to lower job satisfaction and decreased trust in leadership among women professionals.	1, 4, 7, 9	In terms of, you know, diversity, if you may or the organization being used to seeing a lot of females, I think what is different in terms of what is promoted and what is experienced, I think there's a bit of a, you know, disconnect a bit of difference (P6)	Employees perceive DEI as insincere, making it difficult to foster an inclusive work culture.
RQ2	5. Limited Sponsorship & Gendered Barriers to Career Progression	Mentorship and sponsorship are essential for career advancement, yet women in manufacturing often lack access to these support systems. Male-dominated leadership teams may unconsciously favour male protégés, limiting opportunities for women. Without effective mentorship, women managers may struggle to navigate workplace politics and leadership pathways, reducing their ability to progress into senior roles.	22, 31	Like females are mentored by some male mentors, there's a bit of a disconnect because the experiences aren't the same, right? So because they're very few females to mentor all these up and coming females, there's also a lack of mentorship as well. You know nobody to speak to about the struggles and how to navigate how you know how to help navigate. (P6)	Without structured sponsorship, women must navigate career politics alone, limiting upward mobility.

Research Question	Theme	Theme Description	Code Number	Quote example	Organizational Culture Implication
RQ2	6. Cultural Resistance & the Slow Progress of DEI Initiatives	Despite the presence of gender diversity initiatives, cultural and structural barriers continue to hinder effective implementation. Resistance from male colleagues, entrenched organizational biases, and a lack of accountability mechanisms often prevent these initiatives from achieving their intended outcomes. These barriers highlight the need for stronger policy enforcement and leadership commitment to gender equity.	15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 32	Maybe you know, first of all, we need to be Intentional about it, you know, have measurable goals and hold ourself as leaders accountable for the outcomes (P7)	Organizational culture remains unchanged despite formal DEI policies.
RQ3	7. Why Women Stay or Leave: Cultural Barriers to Retention	Workplace inclusivity is a significant factor influencing women's decisions to stay or leave an organization. When women perceive their work environment as unsupportive or biased, they are more likely to seek opportunities elsewhere. High turnover rates among women managers indicate that inclusivity challenges remain unresolved, leading to a loss of female talent in manufacturing leadership roles.	34, 35, 36, 40, 44, 45, 51, 52, 56, 57, 59, 60, 61, 62, 64	I was struggling with building a relationship with one of the CEOs because they thought females don't need to occupy any position in manufacturing. You should just stay home and make babies (P8)	Women leave not due to incompetence but because workplace culture fails to support their advancement.
RQ3	8. Unequal Leadership Pathways & the Culture of Exclusion	Women in manufacturing frequently encounter obstacles when pursuing leadership positions. These include limited access to high-visibility assignments, biased performance evaluations, and the expectation that they must prove their competence more than their male counterparts. These challenges create barriers to career progression, reinforcing gender disparities in senior leadership roles.	38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 54, 63	I have been told before that we didn't think you can go into production because you because of your personality and I think what they were saying is that I'm probably too political and too quiet. (P3)	Biases in leadership selection prevent women from advancing based on merit.
RQ3	9. A Culture of Silence: Psychological Safety, Harassment & Microaggressions	Psychological safety, the ability to express oneself without fear of retribution, is crucial for fostering an inclusive workplace. Women managers who feel unsupported or face microaggressions may hesitate to speak up about workplace challenges. Organizations that cultivate psychological safety through inclusive leadership and anti-discrimination policies tend to have higher job satisfaction and retention rates among women professionals.	37, 53, 55, 58	I'd be safe that I'm at work. I will not be scared to voice out what I see being done wrong, and I'd have the trust in my line manager in my line needed that they are listening to us. (P10)	Without psychological safety, gender-related issues remain unaddressed, reinforcing exclusionary workplace norms.

Table 1 - Presentation of Themes Analysis Summary

5.2 Data Saturation and Sample Overview

5.2.1 Participant Demographics

The study sample consisted of 12 women in middle and senior management positions across various manufacturing organisations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a qualitative research technique that ensures the inclusion of individuals with relevant lived experiences in line with the study's objectives (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024). The sample was strategically designed to encompass a diverse range of professional backgrounds, ensuring a robust understanding of how gender dynamics play out across different manufacturing subsectors.

Participants came from four key industry segments, including automotive, heavy engineering, consumer goods, and industrial manufacturing, each with its own unique challenges and organisational cultures. This industry diversity provided a rich comparative basis for assessing the nuances of DEI implementation across different operational contexts. Table 2 presents a tabular summary of the demographic characteristics of the participants who were interviewed. The table provides an overview of key demographic variables, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the sample composition. The table also provides valuable insights into participants who are contemplating exiting the industry, along with the underlying reasons influencing their decision-making process. Notably, five out of the twelve participants have either considered or are currently considering leaving the industry for various reasons. This finding underscores the critical importance of this study in identifying and evaluating organisational measures that can be implemented to mitigate turnover intentions and enhance employee retention.

Interviewee Demographics							
Participants	**Race Group**	**Age Range**	**Experience**	**Professional Qualification**	**Field/Industry**	**Considering Leaving Manufacturing?**	**Reason (If Yes)**
P1	Black	40-45	26 years	Charted Accountant	Athomotive Manufacturing	No	
P2	Black	40-45	25 years	Economics and Supply Chain Management	Forestry/Paper Manufacturing	No	
P3	Coloured	35-40	16 years	Mechanical Engineer	Athomotive Manufacturing	No	
P4	Black	40-45	23 years	Chemical Engineer	Minerals Processing	No	
P5	Black	40-45	15 years	Marketing and Supply Chain Management	Metal Processing	Yes	Needs more work flexibility
P6	Black	30-35	12 years	Mechanical Engineer	Minerals Processing	No	
P7	Black	35-40	15 years	Chemical Engineer	Chemicals Production	Yes	Limited growth opportunities - perceived glass ceiling. Location of employer
P8	Black	35-40	10 years	Chemical Engineer	Fast Moving Consumable Goods (FMCG)	Yes	Seeking a more flexible role/organisation
P9	Black	30-35	12 years	Chemical Engineer	FMCG	No	
P10	Black	30-35	8 years	Chemical Engineer	FMCG	Yes	Believes manufacturing is a toxic environment for women.
P11	Black	40-45	20 years	Forestry Btech	Forestry/Paper Manufacturing	No	
P12	Black	40-45	24 years	Chemical Engineer	Consulting - Processes	No	Has considered it before. Expects industries to be the same

Table 2 - Participant Demographics Summary

Roles and Responsibilities

Participants occupied middle and senior management roles in both commercial and technical roles, encompassing positions such as plant managers, production heads, engineering leads, finance executives, and supply chain executives. Their experiences provided a broad spectrum of perspectives on how gender DEI policies influence career advancement within hierarchical leadership structures.

Exposure to Corporate DEI Strategies

All participants had direct exposure to corporate diversity policies, with some playing active roles in DEI committees or mentorship programs. This allowed for an in-depth exploration of the practical impact and limitations of DEI strategies at both policy and implementation levels.

By selecting participants with extensive industry experience and exposure to DEI frameworks, the study ensures a comprehensive and credible assessment of the

structural and cultural barriers that continue to shape gender diversity outcomes in manufacturing organisations.

5.2.2 Data Saturation

Data saturation was achieved after 10 interviews, where no new themes or concepts emerged as seen in Figure 2 below, confirming that the data collected was sufficient to address the research questions (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). Achieving data saturation ensures the reliability and depth of findings, as further interviews would likely produce redundant information (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). This stage was critical in qualitative research as it helped validate that enough participants have been interviewed to capture the full range of perspectives on the research topic.

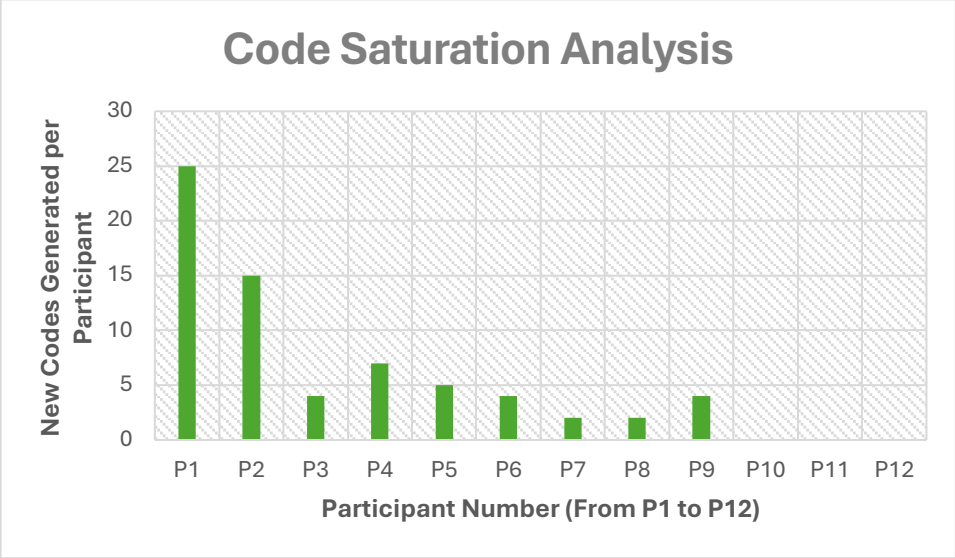

Figure 2 - Code Saturation Analysis

5.3 Understanding Codes and How They Were Generated

5.3.1 What is a Code in Thematic Analysis?

A code in thematic analysis is a label that represents a specific feature of the data. It is an analytic unit that helps categorise data segments based on recurring ideas, actions, or meanings. Coding is essential for distilling large amounts of qualitative data into manageable and interpretable categories.

5.3.2 How Codes Were Generated

Codes were generated through a systematic review of the interview transcripts using Atlas.ti. The coding process followed an inductive approach (thematic analysis), meaning that codes emerged directly from the data rather than being predefined. The following shows a summary of the coding process.

- Identifying all possible codes by reviewing interview responses line by line.
- Grouping related codes to form larger conceptual categories.
- Refining codes and linking them to overarching themes.

Raw data was systematically categorized into codes, which were subsequently grouped into overarching themes. These themes were then mapped back to the research question to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. Selected quotations that encapsulated specific emotional nuances and contextual depth were extracted from the transcriptions to provide a more profound and meaningful understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions. This approach encapsulates the full thematic analysis process employed to rigorously analyse the data and derive meaningful insights.

5.4 Thematic Analysis Results

This section presents the findings from the thematic analysis of interviews conducted with women in leadership positions within the manufacturing sector. The analysis identified five dominant themes that encapsulate the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding organisational culture and gender DEI initiatives. Each theme is discussed in detail below, supported by a number of direct quotations from participants to illustrate key points and deepen the analysis.

5.4.1 Theme 1 - Gendered Workplace Norms & Resistance to Inclusion

This theme primarily addresses RQ1 - How do women managers in manufacturing experience their organisational culture? It highlights the structural and cultural barriers

that hinder women's career progression, including gendered workplace expectations, the assumption of male competence, and resistance to female leadership.

Supporting Quotes and Analysis

P6: *“When I was doing my rounds in training, one of the people that were training me told me that female artisans in the team are dead weight, and they’re telling this to me, as a female who's learning the trade.”*

This explicit gender discrimination highlights the deeply ingrained biases against women in manufacturing. The phrase "dead weight" underscores the perception that women are less capable in technical roles, reinforcing stereotypical assumptions about women's competence in industrial work. This quote emphasizes the blatant resistance and exclusion women face at the entry level before transitioning into more systemic challenges, and begins to show the organisational culture that women perceive in manufacturing organisations.

P3: *“...you were really kind of pre-warned to say that, listen, this is a man's field. So be prepared that not everybody is going to be very welcoming. And make sure that you play your part as well to get the job done.”*

This response captures the gendered expectations placed on women entering the manufacturing sector. The warning serves as an informal initiation into a male-dominated environment where women are expected to adapt rather than the culture in the organisation evolving to be more inclusive. The phrase "make sure that you play your part" reinforces the notion that women must work harder to be accepted, rather than being supported by the organisational culture.

P3: *“There's also a need for a certain persona, and I think obviously being a male-dominated industry, there’s an expectation for a very extroverted persona, somebody that would speak up, somebody that knows how to get things done. Like, if you're going to be the nurturer type... we don’t really care that much.”*

This response highlights the expectation that women conform to traditionally male leadership traits in order to be taken seriously. The devaluation of "nurturing"—a trait commonly associated with female leadership—further alienates women from leadership

positions. This perpetuates a workplace culture where women must masculinize their leadership styles to gain respect, rather than being valued for the diverse skills they bring.

P1: *"...the diversity started coming through and we started to see a change in the culture and a change in the team dynamics and then issues and challenges when men struggled to relate to a female boss..."*

This quote highlights a fundamental resistance to change within male-dominated manufacturing environments. While the introduction of diversity initiatives signals progress and transformation, the organisational culture remains resistant to the inclusion of women in leadership. There is a suggestion of a lack of preparedness among male employees to adapt to female leadership, reinforcing traditional gendered workplace dynamics.

P5: *"...females are more concentrated in the support services as opposed to the manufacturing services. So it's ok to welcome diversities as long as women are in the office not exactly doing engineering… There's still a very strong, hard culture. I would call it, of being a man's world that exists…That means your softness really is not appreciated. When I talk about softness, I'm talking about the soft skills that women have that sometimes they're not familiar with in a work or in a manufacturing environment."*

This quote highlights the occupational segregation in manufacturing, where women are largely confined to support roles rather than core technical positions. While diversity is encouraged, it remains limited to administrative functions, reinforcing gendered divisions of labour and restricting women's access to leadership in engineering and production. The masculinized workplace culture undervalues soft skills which are essential for effective leadership. This devaluation of feminine-associated skills further restricts women's career mobility and reinforces biases about their suitability for leadership roles.

P1: *"...so there was a big drive to teach men how to relate to women in the workplace. It created quite a different dynamic because suddenly men felt like they were not*

themselves... And they didn't know how to act, because everything was wrong. They ended up excluding women altogether in conversations and in engagements."

This response underlines the unintended consequences of gender diversity efforts. Rather than fostering inclusion, efforts to integrate women into leadership roles resulted in men feeling disoriented and uncomfortable. The phrase "felt like they were not themselves" suggests that the workplace culture is deeply ingrained in traditional masculinity, making adaptation difficult. Instead of fostering an inclusive environment, this discomfort led to increased exclusion of women from key workplace interactions, thereby hindering their career progression.

P11: *"I always used to say men are employed for potential. But to women I employed, what will you bring to the table? So, but I mean if we are sitting and competing for one position… It's do you think she will be able to cope?"*

This highlights the double standard in hiring and promotion criteria, where men are given the benefit of the doubt based on potential, whereas women must prove their capability before being considered for the same opportunities. This further conveys the perceived deep seated organisational culture which prejudices women from opportunities in the workplace.

P6: *"Some of the people aren't exposed to, for example, diversity or, they have their own stereotypical way of thinking that an engineer should be an Afrikaans white male as an example. So in a very narrow-minded approach or way of seeing things."*

This statement highlights deep-rooted stereotypes that persist in manufacturing environments, where traditional perceptions of engineering roles exclude women and minorities from being recognized as competent professionals.

P1: *"We've been talking about this for the last five years. The organisation is just not ready, it's not cooperative enough to learn. So there is an element of immaturity in the organisation. There is an element where I think it also comes from a very different culture, and so this change that we're wanting to bring to the organisation is really going to take time."*

Despite prolonged discussions on gender transformation, the organisation's leadership and workforce remain unprepared for structural change. The reference to "immaturity"

indicates a fundamental unwillingness to engage with gender inclusivity at an organisational level. Additionally, the statement suggests that cultural norms within the industry play a role in maintaining gender biases.

P5: *“Yeah, they’ve always been open about diversity and the requirement for women to grow within the industry. Very male-dominated (industry), especially up at the top, it still is, and not exactly woman-friendly…So maybe it's that excitement of knowing the possibilities that still exist within the industry that that keeps me still around.”*

This quote reflects a paradox in diversity initiatives—while organisations outwardly promote gender diversity, internal realities often tell a different story. The phrase "not exactly woman-friendly" implies that despite policies supporting women's career growth, the lived experience of women in these spaces remains challenging. However, the optimism about potential industry transformation indicates that some women remain motivated despite the barriers they face.

P3: *“...But to never feel that you're not good enough just because of your gender? I don't think it's something that males have to process and I think it’s seen as a weakness when you battle with that without realizing. But you know the environment contributes to that. And like you often left alone to battle through that and people don't understand it and it.”*

This quote highlights the psychological burden women face in male-dominated workplaces, where they must constantly validate their competence, unlike their male counterparts. The participant emphasizes the emotional strain and isolation experienced due to a lack of institutional and social support. Additionally, the participant laments the perception that workplace culture often frames men’s challenges as external while positioning women’s struggles as personal inadequacies, further reinforcing gender disparities.

This theme illustrates the systemic and cultural challenges women face in male-dominated manufacturing environments. The quotes reveal patterns of resistance to female leadership, exclusion from key discussions, and the expectation that women must conform to masculine workplace norms to succeed. While organisations have set diversity goals, they often lack the cultural readiness to implement meaningful change.

Women in these environments navigate these biases while having to prove their competence, highlighting the persistent organisational structural barriers to gender inclusivity in manufacturing.

5.4.2 Theme 2 - The 'Boys' Club' Culture & Women's Limited Access to Networks

This theme primarily addresses RQ1: How do women managers in manufacturing experience their organisational culture? It highlights the extent to which exclusion from key networking opportunities hinders women's career advancement. Specifically, it highlights the barriers posed by limited access to mentorship, exclusion from social gatherings, and the prevalence of male-dominated informal decision-making processes, which are entrenched in an organisation's culture and dynamics. These challenges persist despite the expectation that an inclusive organisational culture, committed to gender DEI, would actively mitigate such exclusionary practices.

Supporting Quotes and Analysis

P5: *"...boys clubs do exist. And they all gravitate towards each other. Then you must play sport, and for me luckily, I just so happened that I'm somebody who plays sports. But I see it in the circles that I'm in since most of the time I'm the only female in the cycling circles, and golf circles… Then the guys have a direct access to the top."*

This quote highlights male-dominated informal networks, often referred to as "boys' clubs," which serve as exclusive social spaces where career advancement is facilitated through relationships rather than performance alone. Participation in traditionally male-oriented activities, such as sports, provides direct access to leadership, while those who do not engage in these activities remain excluded from key mentorship, sponsorship, and advancement opportunities.

P10: *"...And because it's an environment that has a lot of guys, you'd find my boss taking the guys out for drinks and not having extended an invite to me, and the people who'd be there would be the guys reporting in my team."*

This response illustrates gendered patterns of socialization in the workplace, where male employees are provided with greater informal access to leadership and career-

enhancing opportunities. The exclusion from these gatherings reinforces professional isolation, limiting women's access to informal mentoring and sponsorship, which are crucial for career progression.

P6: *"...There's I think, also cultural alliance, I'll say that I think, cultural alliance in a way. There's a certain demographic, people who align with themselves demographically, with a certain alignment that they have and, that if you just come to work, knock off and go to your family, you have missed 70% or more of what actually happens…The office is just an implementation of what was strategized after hours."*

This quote suggests that key strategic decisions and career-shaping conversations occur outside of formal working hours, particularly in social spaces that exclude those with family obligations. The phrase "the office is just an implementation of what was strategized after hours" underscores the significant disadvantage faced by women who cannot or choose not to participate in these male-dominated after-hours networks.

P7: *"...You get excluded and on such occasional networking sessions where you know people build tend to build those relationships that really maybe you do not have time to do it because we you know as much as we are, we are colleagues during working hours, we are also mothers outside."*

This statement underscores the conflict between professional networking expectations and caregiving responsibilities, which disproportionately affect women. The expectation to engage in informal networking outside of working hours creates structural disadvantages for women with family obligations, further limiting their access to relationship-building and career progression opportunities.

P3: *"...So if you come in, whether you're female, whether you're black, whether you're male. If you meet their criteria, you become get onto this performance spectrum and everything is good… If you come in and you're not prepared and you're not aware of that, you definitely get left behind and nobody teaches you that…."*

The participant emphasized that industry support and growth are primarily driven by performance rather than demographic factors. This quote highlights the unspoken rules and hidden expectations within organisational culture that determine inclusion in professional networks. While formal structures may appear meritocratic, the lack of

guidance on informal norms creates an invisible barrier to advancement for those who are unaware. The absence of structured mentorship or onboarding on workplace dynamics means that women, particularly those new to leadership roles, are at risk of being left behind in critical networking and sponsorship opportunities.

P3: *“So I don't necessarily think that I've experienced a culture where women in general are excluded, but because nobody teaches you about politics, you genuinely can get excluded.”*

This reinforces the notion that exclusion is not always explicit but rather embedded within organisational politics that are unspoken yet essential for career progression. The participant’s statement suggests that networking and power dynamics are not openly taught, leading to unintentional exclusion of those who do not intuitively navigate these spaces.

P12: *“...I came to you to greet you by hand. You were not enthusiastic. It's like you decided this must be the boss. I must have been the secretary or something. I don't know what you decided. And then you decided I no longer exist. You know, then yeah, the meeting was quite awkward from then on.”*

This response reflects the gendered assumptions and biases that shape professional interactions, further compounding women’s exclusion from influential professional networks. The participant’s experience suggests that even when women attempt to build relationships and assert their leadership positions, they are often dismissed or misidentified, reinforcing their marginalization in informal workplace interactions.

This theme illustrates the systemic exclusion of women from informal networks, which are critical for career progression in male-dominated industries. The quotes highlight how hidden workplace politics, informal socialization, and gendered networking practices contribute to career stagnation and leadership disparities. While exclusion is not always overt, the lack of guidance on workplace politics, reliance on male-centric social spaces, and after-hours decision-making processes serve as structural barriers to inclusion.

5.4.3 Theme 3 - Superficial vs. Structural DEI: Women's Role in Organisational Change

This theme primarily addresses RQ2: How do women managers perceive the effectiveness of gender diversity initiatives in creating a more inclusive organisational culture? It explores participants' perceptions of DEI initiatives as superficial or performative, focusing on diversity quotas versus real empowerment and superficial inclusion efforts.

Supporting Quotes and Analysis

P12: *"...The only black female technical professional. Then I'm the only black female who's in management level, so yeah. That tells you that there's no interest. 0 interest…So we are in management, but you cannot make decisions. So you can't change anything. You can only survive."*

This quote highlights the limitations of representation without empowerment, where women are included in leadership but remain excluded from decision-making authority. The participant's frustration reflects tokenism, where diversity efforts focus on visible representation rather than substantive inclusion. The phrase "you can only survive" suggests that women in leadership may be symbolically present but lack actual influence, which reinforces structural power imbalances within organisations. Furthermore, the explicit mention of race in the participant's account underscores the intersectional challenges faced by Black women in leadership. While intersectionality was not the primary focus of this study, it cannot be overlooked, as black women often experience having to navigate both gendered and racialized barriers in professional spaces. Their hypervisibility in leadership positions may create additional scrutiny, yet this visibility does not necessarily translate into authority or influence.

P10: *"...I'm very exhausted from the systemic challenges that women face in manufacturing. Sometimes, seeing a female leader in power is actually a red flag for me. I have come to understand that just because a black woman is in power, it does not necessarily mean she has real authority. It can be just false advertising—putting a woman in power, but the men still call the shots."*

This statement reflects deep disillusionment with surface-level diversity efforts, where women are placed in leadership roles without genuine decision-making power. The term “false advertising” suggests that organisations may use diversity as a branding strategy rather than a commitment to equity.

P9: *“...I suppose there are good intentions, but then it creates that view of, ‘Well, now you're favouring her because she’s a woman.’ There were underlying discussions about, ‘Who is she? Where did she come from?’ It was almost as if she was placed there to make a statement rather than because of her competence.”*

This response captures the backlash against diversity appointments, where women leaders are perceived as beneficiaries of preferential treatment rather than recognized for their competence. The perception of tokenism can undermine credibility, placing women in a position where they must overperform to justify their presence.

P2: *“… where in a meeting, a woman will present an idea, and it won’t be acknowledged. But as soon as a male colleague presents the same idea, it is received enthusiastically.”*

This statement highlights gendered biases in workplace interactions, where women’s contributions are frequently dismissed until validated by male colleagues. This phenomenon demonstrates how cultural biases persist even when women are included in decision-making spaces.

P11: *“...I think our company has come a long way in being more inclusive. In the past, because the operation side was deemed the most dangerous and physically demanding, they shied away from putting women in those roles. But they have turned around quickly by employing a high-level female manager, which has led to cultural change and greater inclusivity of women.”*

This quote presents a contrasting perspective, suggesting that while gender biases were historically entrenched, organisational culture can evolve with strategic leadership appointments. The hiring of a female manager acted as a catalyst for change, signalling that representation, when coupled with leadership support, can foster greater inclusivity, and perceived reforms in organisational culture.

P11: *“...Yes, they are still lagging in terms of compliance, but in the value chain, they have identified areas needing improvement. There might be more women in some*

sections and fewer in others. That is why they have introduced DEI programs with champions, led from the top by our group CEO."

This statement acknowledges that gender diversity efforts are ongoing and require continual assessment. The participant recognizes that compliance is not always met, and meaningful inclusion is still inconsistent across different organisational areas. DEI champions and leadership commitment from the highest levels of management suggests a top-down approach to embedding change.

P2: *"I think when we looked at our stats, we noticed that we were below the target that we wanted to achieve in terms of diversity and inclusion. So we've got a 2030 target or vision, which is linked to that is we want to have as a purposeful and diverse and inclusion."*

This statement highlights the gap between policy and practice. While organisations may set diversity targets, the actual implementation of these goals remains slow, indicating that diversity initiatives often serve as aspirational goals rather than actionable strategies. The reliance on a long-term target rather than immediate interventions suggests a lack of urgency in addressing the underlying issues preventing women from advancing. However, the participant expressed optimism, noting that the establishment of a measurable target facilitated the organisation's ability to monitor progress effectively. Additionally, it enabled leadership to intervene when progress toward achieving the set objectives appeared stagnant.

This theme highlights the complex tension between tokenism and genuine gender inclusivity in organisational DEI efforts. The participant responses reveal that while some progress has been made, many women remain marginalized in leadership, lack decision-making power, and face ongoing biases. The perception of token appointments, exclusion from key engagements, and resistance to female leadership suggest that diversity initiatives alone are insufficient without structural and cultural change. The findings suggest that numerical diversity alone does not equate to structural change, emphasizing the need for deeper cultural and institutional transformations that go beyond quotas and symbolic representation.

5.4.4 Theme 4 - Performative DEI & the Disconnect Between Policy and Practice

This theme primarily addresses RQ2: How do women managers perceive the effectiveness of gender diversity initiatives in creating a more inclusive organisational culture? The theme reflects the contrast between superficial DEI commitments (performativity) and the need for genuine, accountable actions that drive meaningful cultural change. Participants described a significant disconnect between organisational DEI policies and actual workplace experiences, highlighting the lack of accountability, inconsistent enforcement, superficial commitment to gender inclusion, and in some instances an environment where sexual harassment is still very prevalent.

Supporting Quotes and Analysis

P6: *"...In terms of diversity…I think there is a difference in terms of what is promoted and what is experienced, I think there's a bit of a disconnect a bit of difference."*

This quote illustrates the gap between rhetoric and reality in diversity initiatives. While organisations may publicly promote inclusivity, women often experience a workplace culture that does not fully align with these values. The participant's mention of a disconnect between what is promoted and what is experienced suggests that efforts to increase female representation are not necessarily accompanied by meaningful cultural shifts that support women's professional advancement and workplace well-being.

P3: *"...Support. I think when I was a graduated, I started receiving quite a bit of support from our executives. I would define that support loosely as a sponsorship. I was always given opportunities for different roles, like I was a graduate and I was asked to lead a project which is not really something that happens."*

This quote provides a nuanced perspective, indicating that some leaders within organisations actively support women's development. However, the participant's qualification that they use the term "support" loosely suggests that this assistance was not necessarily systemic but rather depended on individual leadership discretion. Although articulated through a positive tone, this underscores the need for structured and consistent policies rather than sporadic acts of support.

P3: *“...oh, this is why they promoted you look very good in your clothes, in your own clothes? And then she proceeds to say that, you know, she thinks my relationship with my, with my general manager is one of the reasons why I had gotten promoted.”*

This quote demonstrates how women’s professional achievements are often undermined by gendered assumptions and biases. Despite their competence, women are frequently subjected to dismissive and inappropriate commentary that attributes their success to personal relationships rather than merit. This reflects a hostile work culture even from women in the same environment that continues to devalue women’s contributions, regardless of DEI policies advocating for their advancement.

P2: *“...We also have a management charter that we put through as one of the things that we wanted to create as enablers to drive the values that we wanted to drive.”*

This statement highlights the proactive efforts made by the organisation to establish a structured approach to gender equity through a formalized management charter. Such initiatives demonstrate a commitment to embedding DEI values within the corporate framework, providing a foundational structure for cultural transformation. However, while these policies serve as important enablers, their success depends on consistent implementation and accountability mechanisms that translate organisational intent into tangible progress.

P1: *“...But we're not intentional about putting a woman in there, there's, there's, HR can push for it, but it's just, it's not going to happen.”*

This quote explicitly points to a lack of institutional commitment to gender diversity, even when HR departments advocate for it. The phrase “it’s just not going to happen” reflects the resistance to actively placing women in key leadership roles, despite formal policies encouraging diversity. This highlights a critical gap between performative efforts and real structural change.

P5: *“...On Women's Day and that's pretty much it. But when it comes to actual actions that make a difference. I cannot pinpoint down to a program that we do that supports women.”*

This statement critiques the performative nature of gender diversity initiatives, where organisations may celebrate women symbolically but fail to implement tangible, long-

term strategies for gender equity. The reference to Women's Day as the only visible acknowledgment of women's contributions suggests a lack of sustained commitment to systemic change.

This theme highlights the disconnect between DEI policies and actual workplace experiences, where gender diversity efforts often lack accountability and meaningful implementation. Participants express concerns that while organisations promote gender inclusion, many initiatives remain performative rather than impactful. Key issues include cultural resistance, the undermining of women's achievements, and the lack of consistent policies that drive real change.

5.4.5 Theme 5 - Limited Sponsorship & Gendered Barriers to Career Progression

This theme primarily addresses RQ2: How do women managers perceive the effectiveness of gender diversity initiatives in creating a more inclusive organisational culture? Participants highlighted the critical role that mentorship and sponsorship play in advancing women's careers. However, findings indicate that structured sponsorship programs are lacking, and informal mentorship opportunities tend to exclude women, leading to slower career progression.

Supporting Quotes and Analysis

P8: *"...I realized the value of mentorship and the value of coaching. So I signed myself up for a program that is hosted by (my company). And yeah, I was on a coaching program that is sponsored by (my company) for a good 12 months to help me settle in the room and to help develop some of my skills."*

This quote highlights the positive impact of structured mentorship programs, demonstrating how formal coaching initiatives can equip women with the necessary skills and support systems to navigate their roles effectively. The participant emphasized the need for proactive organisational efforts to offer mentorship systematically.

P8: *"...So I think for me, if this program was there during my younger years, my career would have turned out differently than it would have turned out now."*

The participant reflects on the long-term benefits of mentorship, acknowledging that early career sponsorship could have significantly altered her professional trajectory. This statement reinforces the argument that structured mentorship should be embedded from the early stages of a woman's career rather than being available only at later career stages.

P5: *"...The only time you'll come across a mentor is if you are, for example, studying like myself…. And in the formal request that you get appointed the mentor, that's if you're studying at a postgrad level. But other than that, there isn't a company-wide program."*

This quote highlights the limited availability of mentorship programs. The absence of a company-wide initiative means that mentorship is selective rather than accessible to all employees, further reinforcing gender disparities in career progression.

P3: *"...Navigating mentorship is very difficult. I remember after somebody telling me, oh, you've only been promoted because of relationships. I became very cautious about my relationship with men and it doesn't have to be that way because I have, like I said, one of the seniors that really has been a sponsor to me. And I've always had to guard myself against interactions."*

This quote underscores the challenges women face in forming professional mentorship relationships, particularly when gendered assumptions and biases come into play. The participant's experience reflects the double-bind women often face, where seeking sponsorship and mentorship can be misinterpreted as favouritism or personal relationships rather than professional merit. The participant also eludes to the fact that a mentorship relationship would be easier to maintain, if the mentor was a woman. This highlights the importance of gender representation at senior levels.

P6: *"...Like females are mentored by some male mentors, there's a bit of a disconnect because the experiences aren't the same, right? So because there are very few females to mentor all these up-and-coming females, there's also a lack of mentorship as well. You know, nobody to speak to about the struggles and how to navigate."*

This statement highlights the gender gap in mentorship representation, where the limited number of female mentors restricts the availability of relatable guidance for

aspiring women leaders. Male mentors, while valuable, may not always fully understand the unique gendered challenges that women face in leadership roles.

P6: *"...The lack of sponsorship. So within the organisation, especially in senior management, there's not a lot of females in the room. So when somebody, for example, has a bad experience or has had a bad perception about me as a female, there are very few people who stand up."*

This quote reflects the lack of advocacy for women in leadership, where the underrepresentation of women in senior roles means there are fewer allies to challenge biases, provide sponsorship, or support career progression. Without sponsorship, women are left to navigate systemic barriers alone, making it harder to overcome negative perceptions.

This theme highlights the structural disadvantages women in manufacturing face due to the absence of formal sponsorship and mentorship programs. While individual leaders may provide support, this assistance remains inconsistent and often dependent on personal discretion rather than organisational policy. Without deliberate efforts to embed mentorship and sponsorship into company culture, women continue to face barriers to career advancement, limiting their ability to progress into senior leadership roles at the same rate as their male counterparts.

5.4.6 Theme 6 – Cultural Resistance & the Slow Progress of DEI Initiatives

This theme primarily addresses RQ1: How do women managers perceive the effectiveness of gender diversity initiatives in creating a more inclusive organisational culture? Participants described that despite the presence of DEI policies, deeply embedded cultural norms continue to pose significant barriers to their effective implementation. The gap between policy and practice was repeatedly cited as a major issue, as many initiatives remain surface-level without meaningful structural change.

Supporting Quotes and Analysis

P4: *"...And equity is not usually a criteria because it's same as discriminatory. It will only be used if you've got two candidates of equal experience, equal footing where you have to choose between the two… Then you use equity as a tiebreaker."*

This quote highlights the narrow application of equity policies, suggesting that while gender equity is acknowledged, it is not a primary driver of hiring and promotion decisions. The statement reflects a hesitancy to prioritize equity beyond minimal compliance, reinforcing a structural reluctance to actively promote women in leadership roles.

P5: *"...Another gentleman was also alleged was asked to leave quietly, asked to leave in the workplace because he was also found in the wrong, but almost a slap on the wrist. And please can you leave us quietly because we don't want to be publicized in this type of behaviour..."*

This quote highlights organisational reluctance to enforce consequences for misconduct in a transparent manner, particularly regarding gender-related workplace issues. By handling such cases discreetly, organisations fail to set a strong precedent for acceptable behaviour, thereby undermining DEI policies and their intended impact on workplace culture.

P6: *"...There are policies in place, and we have set employment equity targets for getting women into leadership roles. But the way it's communicated creates a negative feeling… Promoting this person because they're female and therefore we need to meet the target… Lack of communication and transparency really hinders the progression of women."*

This quote underscores the damaging effects of poor communication surrounding DEI policies. When gender diversity efforts are framed as a quota rather than a merit-based initiative, it fosters resentment and scepticism, particularly among male colleagues. This miscommunication weakens the credibility of DEI initiatives and creates additional barriers for women seeking advancement.

P7: *"...Maybe we need to be intentional about it, have measurable goals, and hold ourselves as leaders accountable for the outcomes."*

This quote advocates for stronger accountability measures in DEI implementation. The participant emphasizes that intentionality, goal-setting (with a key focus on measurable goals), and leadership accountability are crucial for transforming gender diversity from a policy-driven concept into a lived workplace reality.

P10: *"...They did not even have the HR director sitting at the board. So you do not have a people's director advocating for people issues at a very senior level, so you could actually see that inclusion and diversity are not really something that the business abides by."*

This quote highlights the lack of senior-level Human Resource representation for DEI advocacy, demonstrating that without HR leadership presence in key decision-making forums, gender diversity remains a low-priority issue within the organisation.

This theme underscores the disparity between policy commitments and actual workplace practices, emphasizing how cultural resistance, lack of accountability, lack of transparency, lack of clear communication of DEI initiatives, and insufficient leadership commitment hinder the effectiveness of DEI initiatives. While diversity frameworks exist, the absence of structured implementation, measurement, and enforcement mechanisms, weakens their impact, leaving women vulnerable to systemic biases and exclusion.

5.4.7 Theme 7 – Why Women Stay or Leave: Cultural Barriers to Retention

This theme primarily addresses RQ3: How do women's perceptions of the gender inclusivity of the organisational culture influence their intention to leave or stay? Participants described how their experiences with gender inclusivity, or the lack thereof, shaped their career decisions**.** While some participants expressed a commitment to remaining in their roles due to supportive leadership or personal resilience, others indicated that persistent barriers, exclusion, and lack of progression opportunities contributed to their decisions to leave.

Supporting Quotes and Analysis

P9: *"...No, I think there's an acknowledgment of it. That is not enough women, whether it's actually, is it a concern? Yes, I guess internal conversations happen, but I think the*

problem comes in is like. Is it the biggest concern that we have? Is it one of our top five priority areas for the business at the moment? And the answer is no, not even, I don't think it's in the top 10 for the top 20."

This statement reflects the lack of prioritization of gender diversity efforts, where diversity is acknowledged but not seen as a business-critical issue. The fact that it is not ranked among the company's top priorities suggests that gender inclusivity remains a low-impact concern for leadership, limiting its effectiveness in shaping retention strategies.

P8: *"...You know, I will no longer have that flexibility. With that flexibility not being there, will I still be afforded the same opportunities that I would have been afforded if I had not fallen pregnant?"*

This statement underscores the career progression challenges faced by women due to motherhood and workplace inflexibility. The participant's concern about losing career opportunities due to pregnancy reflects the structural barriers that penalize women for caregiving responsibilities, contributing to attrition.

P11: *"You can be employed, but when you leave the company you don't leave the company because of the company policy. You leave the company because of the people in the company."*

This quote highlights how organisational culture, rather than policies, plays a significant role in women's decisions to stay or leave. A toxic or exclusionary work environment can outweigh policy-driven retention efforts, demonstrating the need for inclusive leadership and cultural change.

P8: *"...You know, I was struggling and there was no support in the organisation in how best to develop me in the role. And how best to help me lead in the role that I'm in? We did a year's session and yeah, after that, you know, I could navigate my role much easier in manufacturing. I realized that nothing is wrong with me. I'm just female, that's it."*

This participant's experience demonstrates the impact of structured support and training programs on career navigation. The realization that gender biases, rather than

incompetence, were the real challenge reflects how targeted leadership support can improve retention. The participants new-found trust in their competency allowed for a higher level of confidence in the workplace.

P8: *“...A year and a half to gain credibility…Imagine you hire somebody, but you think they are not credible. It's like, wow! What's going on here? And you know that that's only because I'm female. Prior to me, in my role, the person who occupied this position was male, and he never had any struggles with doing his role in manufacturing.”*

This statement illustrates the credibility gap that women face in male-dominated industries, where they must prove themselves more extensively than male colleagues. The additional time required to gain recognition can contribute to frustration and attrition, particularly when women see their male counterparts receiving immediate respect and authority.

P10: *“...So if you don't have people like me who sit in leadership and who sit in positions where decisions are made, nobody is there to advocate for women to say, ‘but how the system is being run is actually not inclusive, right?’”*

This statement highlights the importance of representation in leadership. Without women in decision-making roles, there is an overreliance on men to challenge systemic exclusion, making it harder to drive meaningful change.

P5: *“...People are still hurting and people are still being mistreated and abused. Really. That's a reality for women. But yeah, depending on if she can stomach those hurdles as a person and go to other women in the workplace, that’s the only way to be able to navigate this environment.”*

This quote illustrates the resilience required for women to remain in male-dominated industries. The normalization of mistreatment and exclusion creates a hostile work environment, where retention depends on individual endurance rather than systemic support.

P1: *“...I think they're still kind of behind in terms of a lot of women in senior rooms, let's put it that way. So for me, it's based on where I've been and what I'm seeing here. The*

transition has not been fast enough. There are a lot of women at the lower levels, but as we progress up the career ladder, there are fewer and fewer women in technical roles."

This quote highlights the lack of upward mobility for women, reinforces the idea that women do indeed enter the industry, but struggle to advance into leadership.

P2: *"...We did an exercise where we spoke to women about why we are seeing so few women on the shop floor moving up the ladder in manufacturing. Issues like improper PPE, lack of sanitary bins, and poorly designed bathrooms were raised. Even these small factors contribute to making the workplace less inclusive for women."*

This statement emphasizes how hygiene factors and environmental barriers contribute to attrition. The lack of basic accommodations for women in manufacturing settings reflects broader exclusionary workplace norms that discourage retention.

This theme underscores the pivotal role of organisational culture in shaping women's career trajectories. While some workplaces foster retention through supportive environments, others perpetuate systemic barriers, leading to high attrition rates. Participants highlighted the challenge of balancing professional and caregiving responsibilities, particularly in male-dominated industries with inflexible workplace expectations. The absence of flexible work arrangements, limited maternity support, and rigid career progression structures further hinder women's advancement. Their experiences suggest that meaningful gender inclusivity efforts, beyond superficial diversity initiatives, are essential for retaining female talent and sustaining a pipeline for women in leadership.

5.4.8 Theme 8 – Unequal Leadership Pathways & the Culture of Exclusion

This theme primarily addresses RQ3: How do women's perceptions of the gender inclusivity of the organisational culture influence their intention to leave or stay? Participants identified structural and cultural barriers that hinder their professional growth, ranging from limited sponsorship opportunities to biases in leadership selection. Despite efforts to promote gender diversity, women continue to face unequal access to

leadership roles, exclusion from key decision-making spaces, and implicit biases that shape career trajectories. The absence of clear progression pathways and the preference for traditionally male leadership traits further exacerbate the challenges women encounter in advancing within their organisations.

Supporting Quotes and Analysis

P5: *"...There isn't anything specifically designed for women's advancement, no structured programs to skill up women's careers. I find that a disadvantage."*

This quote highlights the absence of targeted initiatives to address gender disparities in leadership development. Without dedicated programs for scaling women's careers, gender diversity efforts risk being tokenistic rather than impactful.

P12: *"...I think women don't make it as far as I have because the environment is toxic, and they are not welcomed. It's not about ability, it's about whether the doors are opened for them. When a (white) male starts as a graduate, someone holds his hand. Women don't even ask for special treatment; they just want the same opportunities."*

This statement reinforces the importance of sponsorship and equal access to opportunities, highlighting how men receive more guidance and informal support in navigating their careers, whereas women often face exclusion from critical professional networks.

P5: *"...Certainly, when it comes to promotions and career growth, it is still very much a man's world. The boys almost walk in and are chosen simply by virtue of being there."*

This statement reflects the entrenched male dominance in promotion decisions, where informal networks and unconscious biases favour men, perpetuating exclusionary practices that hinder women's upward mobility.

P9: *"...If you then say that I'm not mobile, it automatically means that I cannot be a top performer. I can deliver the best results, but if I say I cannot move to another location, then I am not considered for promotion."*

This statement demonstrates how geographical mobility is often used as a criterion for leadership advancement, disproportionately affecting women who may have caregiving

responsibilities that prevent relocation. This also highlights the lack of flexible work conditions in the manufacturing environment.

P2: *"...And also being a bit clearer around their growth path. It's very important for businesses to map career journeys for employees."*

The participant emphasizes the need for structured career progression plans, which are often lacking for women. Without clear development pathways and transparent criteria for promotion, the participant felt that women may struggle to navigate their advancement in manufacturing.

P3: *"...I was also given an opportunity to attend various development programs, both locally and abroad. Rotating across different areas of the business allowed me to gain exposure, but there is still a lot more to learn."*

In her statement, the participant was relaying how being able to gain access to professional development opened doors for her, and lead to her career development. She did however show concern that these are often individualised rather than systematically embedded into company policy. The company preferred to open these up to the 'best performers', however the lack of consistency in access to development program may perpetuate stifled career progress amongst women.

P2: *"...I think support for development would be a big one. Sometimes you would think it would be just a female supporting another female, but even men can be strong allies in development."*

This statement highlights the importance of broad-based support for women's career development, emphasizing that mentorship and sponsorship should not be gender-exclusive. While peer support among women is valuable, the engagement of male allies in professional development programs is crucial in dismantling gender biases and creating inclusive career growth opportunities.

This theme underscores the systemic obstacles that restrict women's career progression, highlighting how gender biases, exclusion from informal leadership networks, and limited sponsorship hinder advancement. Without intentional interventions, such as structured leadership development programs, transparent promotion criteria, and targeted mentorship initiatives, women will continue to

experience slower career growth and higher attrition rates in leadership pipelines. Organisations must actively address these barriers by fostering inclusive leadership selection processes, eliminating biases in promotion decisions, and ensuring that career advancement opportunities are equitably distributed. Without these structural changes, gender diversity efforts will remain symbolic rather than transformative.

5.4.9 Theme 9 – A Culture of Silence: Psychological Safety, Harassment & Microaggressions

This theme primarily addresses RQ3: How do women's perceptions of the gender inclusivity of the organisational culture influence their intention to leave or stay? Psychological safety emerged as a significant concern, with participants reporting that cultural norms often discourage open discussions on gender-related challenges. Additionally, issues such as workplace sexual harassment and microaggressions were cited as key factors influencing decisions to either remain in or leave an organisation. A workplace environment that fosters psychological safety enables employees to voice concerns, challenge biases, and seek support without fear of retaliation. However, participants noted that manufacturing environments remain male-dominated, with rigid and unspoken expectations that silence discussions on gender inclusivity. The lack of the implementation of inclusive policies and failure to address misconduct contribute to a culture where women feel undervalued, unsafe, and excluded.

Supporting Quotes and Analysis

P10: *"...Oh, no, you don't point it out. You don't. You don't do that, because it has a lot of implications and repercussions that come with it."*

This quote illustrates the fear of speaking out about gender-related issues, demonstrating how workplace culture discourages transparency and discourages individuals from raising concerns about biases, discrimination, or harassment.

P10: *"...I'd be safe that I'm at work. I will not be scared to voice out what I see being done wrong, and I'd have the trust in my line manager that they are listening to us."*

Here, the participant highlights how psychological safety is essential in ensuring that employees feel empowered to raise concerns. The absence of trust in leadership

creates an environment where women may hesitate to report misconduct or seek career support.

P10: *"...If psychological safety was going to be a predominant theme in manufacturing, and you'd have leaders who are there to listen to people, I think I would."*

This statement reflects the importance of leadership in fostering psychological safety. The participant suggests that genuine inclusivity requires leadership that actively listens, acknowledges challenges, and implements meaningful change.

P10: *"...If they were comfortable enough to call me names (cat-calling), I wonder how many people on the floor, especially women, experience that level of confidence and being comfortable just being disrespectful towards me just because I'm a woman."*

This statement reflects the normalization of workplace sexual harassment, where disrespect and harassment towards women is often tolerated, making it more difficult for them to challenge inappropriate behaviour or assert authority. This environment feels unsafe for women, and leads to intentions to leave.

P5: *"...Or if they are reporting to their bosses, you get females coming up to you and saying, 'I reported it, but nothing happened.' But at the end of the day, we claim to have an open-door policy, yet what we say and what we do don't always connect."*

This statement reflects the gap between company policies and actual enforcement. Women may feel discouraged from reporting misconduct if they perceive that their concerns will not be taken seriously. Furthermore the lack of condemnation of this behaviour leads women to feel that the environment is inherently toxic.

P12: *"...One of the practicals I was on site, I actually experienced sexual harassment at work, and I was like, how old was I? 19 years old at the time? So experiencing that was a huge shock for me. My boss at the time was extremely supportive, which I appreciate now more than I did back then because I didn't yet understand the gravity of the situation."*

This statement highlights the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment and the critical role of supportive leadership in addressing such incidents. However, the participant also acknowledges that young women may not immediately recognize or

feel equipped to respond to these experiences, making structured reporting mechanisms essential.

P5: *"...I think in the workplace, sexual harassment training is very necessary. It happens a lot in the manufacturing environment, yet we've never rolled it out. When I worked at **, every employee underwent sexual harassment training during induction, making it clear what was acceptable and what was not."*

This statement emphasizes the necessity of proactive interventions through structured training and awareness programs. The lack of formal education on harassment results in employees being left without clear guidance, thereby perpetuating workplace cultures in which misconduct is either tolerated or overlooked. The participant underscores the significant role that past training initiatives have played in educating men about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in interactions with women

P7: *"...The current culture here is more performance-driven. The focus is on efficiency and results, with little emphasis on inclusion. The work environment is more competitive than collaborative."*

This quote highlights how an excessive focus on performance and efficiency can possibly undermine diversity and inclusion efforts. When inclusion is not integrated into core business priorities, gender-related concerns are deprioritized, leaving women unsupported.

P10: *"...That's why I said with me, it had to be a bit of a teaching moment because with time I've gotten to understand that advocacy first starts with teaching people, right? Because sometimes people do not know the difference. One of the guys actually didn't know, and I told him, 'Take out Wikipedia and check examples of sexual harassment.' And after that, he was like, 'I sincerely apologize. I thought I was just being a nice person towards you.'"*

This quote highlights the importance of education in addressing gender-related workplace challenges. While some individuals may act inappropriately due to a lack of awareness, organisations must implement mandatory training and structured policies to clarify acceptable behaviour.

This theme highlights the role of psychological safety in shaping women's workplace experiences, demonstrating how cultural norms, lack of transparency, and inadequate response to gender-related concerns influence retention. Without an environment where women feel empowered to share experiences and advocate for equitable treatment, gender inclusivity efforts risk being superficial rather than transformative. Creating safe reporting channels, implementing bias-awareness training, and embedding gender-sensitive policies into organisational culture will be critical to achieving genuine inclusion and long-term retention of female talent.

5.5 Summary of Findings

This study highlights the persistent gender-related challenges faced by women in manufacturing leadership. Despite some progress, the industry remains shaped by male-dominated norms, exclusionary practices, and systemic barriers to gender equity.

A recurring theme among participants was the struggle for legitimacy and acceptance. Women frequently reported the need to continuously prove their competence, often exceeding the expectations placed on male colleagues. Leadership qualities remained subconsciously associated with masculine traits, creating additional barriers for women who did not conform to these expectations. Many were explicitly warned early in their careers that manufacturing was a "man's world," requiring them to adopt a tougher persona to succeed.

Exclusion from informal networks emerged as a significant obstacle. Participants described how career advancement opportunities were frequently determined through male-dominated social interactions, such as golf outings, after-hours drinks, or informal gatherings, from which women were often excluded. Even those who attempted to integrate into these spaces found that an unspoken barrier remained, limiting their access to mentorship, sponsorship, and key decision-making circles.

A notable concern was the disparity between DEI policies and workplace realities. While companies had gender diversity initiatives in place, these were often perceived as symbolic rather than substantive. Many women in leadership reported having limited influence in decision-making, with some feeling like diversity tokens rather than

respected leaders. Others observed that their contributions were overlooked until echoed by male colleagues.

The lack of structured sponsorship and mentorship further hindered career progression. Unlike their male counterparts, who benefited from informal mentorship through long-standing professional relationships, women had to proactively seek out support, often without success. The absence of formal programs meant that many women lacked the advocacy required to advance into senior leadership roles.

Another key finding was resistance to change at an organisational level. Despite public commitments to DEI, entrenched cultural biases, slow-moving leadership, and reluctance to disrupt existing power structures continued to impede progress. Several participants noted that when gender equity initiatives were introduced, male colleagues often responded with discomfort or exclusionary behaviours, further isolating women rather than fostering inclusion.

For some, these persistent challenges contributed to career stagnation and attrition considerations. Several participants contemplated leaving the industry due to hostility, lack of support, and limited upward mobility, reinforcing the perception that the glass ceiling remained firmly in place. Others, however, remained committed to driving change, either to pave the way for future generations of women or because they had found allies in leadership who actively championed inclusivity.

The lack of psychological safety was a particularly troubling finding. Many women reported experiencing microaggressions, sexual harassment, and reluctance from leadership to address these issues. Fear of retaliation or dismissal discouraged them from speaking out, further perpetuating a culture of silence.

Despite these barriers, participants identified pockets of progress. Some noted growing support from leadership, emerging mentorship programs, and greater openness to gender inclusivity among younger male colleagues. A few had witnessed meaningful cultural shifts within their organisations, demonstrating that sustained leadership commitment and structural support could foster genuine change.

Ultimately, while DEI initiatives have created pathways for women in manufacturing, these remain limited. Women in the sector do not seek preferential treatment but rather

fair treatment, an environment that recognises their contributions, fosters equitable leadership opportunities, and actively supports their inclusion.

The next chapter will critically examine these findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, providing recommendations for enhancing DEI efforts and fostering a more inclusive and supportive manufacturing sector.

Chapter 6: Discussion Of Results

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive discussion of the study's findings in relation to the research questions, existing literature, and theoretical frameworks. The purpose of this discussion is to critically interpret the results, contextualising them within the broader academic and industrial landscape of gender diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in manufacturing. Through an in-depth analysis of participant experiences, this chapter highlights the systemic and cultural barriers that persist despite formal DEI initiatives and explores the implications of these findings for organisational policies and leadership strategies.

The discussion is structured around the study's three key research questions:

1. RQ1 - How do women managers in manufacturing experience their organisational culture?
2. RQ2 - How do women managers perceive the effectiveness of gender diversity initiatives in creating a more inclusive organisational culture?
3. RQ3 - How do women's perceptions of the gender inclusivity of the organisational culture influence their intention to leave or stay?

The findings of this study underscore the complex and multifaceted challenges that persist in the implementation of DEI initiatives within the manufacturing sector. While many organisations have formally adopted DEI policies and programs, their effectiveness remains constrained by several entrenched structural and cultural barriers. The study identifies a critical factors that hinder the success of these initiatives, for example; (1) deeply rooted cultural norms that reinforce traditional gender roles and workplace hierarchies, (2) the exclusion of women from informal networks and power structures that influence decision-making and career advancement, (3) the absence of a psychologically safe environment in which employees, particularly women, can voice concerns and challenge inequitable practices without fear of retaliation, and (4) a lack of accountability mechanisms to ensure the meaningful implementation and monitoring of DEI commitments.

These findings align with existing literature on gender disparities as outlined in Chapter 2, in male-dominated industries, reinforcing prior research that highlights the persistence of exclusionary practices and systemic biases. However, this study extends current understandings by emphasizing the critical intersection between organisational culture and the efficacy of DEI efforts in the manufacturing sector. It highlights how implicit norms and informal workplace dynamics often undermine formal policies, thereby limiting their intended impact. This research contributes to the broader discourse on workplace diversity by illustrating the necessity of integrating cultural transformation strategies with DEI initiatives to create sustainable and inclusive work environments.

Moreover, the study suggests that addressing these barriers requires a holistic approach, including leadership commitment to cultural change, targeted interventions to dismantle informal power structures, and the establishment of robust accountability frameworks. Without these measures, DEI initiatives risk being performative rather than transformative, reinforcing rather than dismantling systemic inequities in the sector.

This chapter is structured as follows; The discussion begins with an exploration of the experiences of women in manufacturing (RQ1), focusing on workplace culture, gender expectations, and leadership dynamics. The second section examines the barriers preventing women from fully benefiting from DEI initiatives (RQ2), including tokenism, exclusion from informal networks, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms. The final section explores potential strategies for the improvement of retention of women (RQ3**)**, highlighting career advancement barriers, psychological safety issues organisational and policy-level interventions that could drive meaningful change.

Given that organisational culture plays a pivotal role in shaping workplace dynamics and influencing the success of DEI initiatives, this chapter applies Schein's Model of Organisational Culture as the primary theoretical framework to interpret the findings. By examining the interplay between artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions, the analysis explores how cultural elements within manufacturing firms either enable or constrain the effectiveness of DEI programs in fostering gender diversity in senior leadership roles. By applying a contemporary lens, this research

provides a nuanced understanding of the complex interaction between organisational culture and gender DEI in manufacturing.

Furthermore, this chapter explores how organisational culture shapes these experiences and perceptions. It assesses the extent to which cultural values, norms, and workplace artifacts either support or hinder gender inclusivity, aligning this analysis with the overarching goal of identifying strategies to foster meaningful and sustainable gender diversity. By critically engaging with both theoretical perspectives and empirical data, this chapter contributes to the broader discourse on organisational culture and gender equity, offering evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the impact of DEI initiatives and strengthening retention strategies for women in senior leadership roles.

The discussion integrates the themes identified in Chapter 5 with organisational culture theory, specifically using Schein's model of organisational culture as a guiding analytical framework. Schein's model of organisational culture provides a structured approach to understanding how workplace culture manifests and operates at different levels within an organisation. The model consists of three interrelated levels: Artefacts, Espoused Values, and Underlying Assumptions. The integration of Schein's model into this discussion enables a comprehensive analysis of how manufacturing organisations construct and sustain their cultural environment, and how this environment influences women managers' experiences. By linking findings to this model, this study uncovers discrepancies between formal organisational commitments to diversity and the lived realities of women in leadership roles.

This discussion aims to bridge the gap between policy and practice, identifying concrete pathways through which manufacturing organisations can transform DEI from a compliance-driven exercise into a fundamental aspect of organisational culture. Ultimately, this chapter not only interprets the findings through an academic lens but also provides a foundation for the recommendations presented in Chapter 7. In doing so, it aligns with the study's broader objective of informing strategic interventions that promote gender inclusivity in manufacturing, while also contributing to global efforts

toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5.5.2, which aims to ensure women's full and effective participation in leadership and decision-making roles.

6.2 Discussion of Findings for Research Question 1

Research Question 1 (RQ1) - How do women managers in manufacturing experience their organisational culture?

The findings from RQ1 provide critical insights into the lived experiences of women leaders, particularly in relation to cultural dynamics, informal workplace norms, and structural barriers that impact their professional trajectories. Two key themes emerged from Chapter 5 that are closely related to RQ1; (1) Gendered Workplace Norms and Resistance to Inclusion, and (2) The Boy's Club Culture and Women's Limited Access to Networks. These themes underscore the systemic barriers women encounter in manufacturing organisations, revealing a disconnect between stated diversity policies and actual workplace practices. The two themes will be analysed using Schein's Model of Organisational Culture to determine how participants' lived experiences correspond to specific levels within the model.

6.2.1 Artefacts - Visible Structures and Practices

Artifacts, as defined in Schein's model of organisational culture, are the most visible and tangible elements of workplace culture, reflecting an organisation's formal policies, structures, and daily practices (Byrne et al., 2022). These artifacts shape employees' lived experiences by either reinforcing inclusivity or perpetuating exclusionary norms (Lam et al, 2021). In manufacturing, where male-dominated cultures persist, artifacts play a crucial role in determining whether diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives translate into meaningful cultural change or remain superficial (Byrne et al., 2022).

Workplace Policies and DEI Initiatives

The majority of women employed in manufacturing firms acknowledge the presence of DEI policies that formally promote an equitable employment environment. However, participants express concerns regarding the lack of effective implementation and

measurable outcomes of these policies, perceiving them as largely ineffective. This observation aligns with existing literature, which indicates that such policies frequently lack enforcement mechanisms, rendering them symbolic rather than substantive (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021). Women managers often report that, despite formal organisational commitments to inclusion, workplace practices continue to privilege male employees through informal gatekeeping structures and implicit biases. Boulware et al. (2022) corroborates this finding, asserting that deeply ingrained gendered assumptions within organisational culture often undermine formal policies, thereby limiting their effectiveness in advancing women's careers. Consequently, the findings suggest that workplace policies and DEI initiatives are widely perceived by women as performative measures rather than substantive interventions capable of addressing gender disparities in the manufacturing industry.

Representation in Leadership Structures

The findings indicate that women perceive visible artifacts, such as leadership composition and decision-making structures, as critical indicators of an organisation's commitment to gender diversity. Despite some progress in appointing women to managerial positions, they remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles. Hoobler et al (2018) characterizes this phenomenon, in which women’s presence is limited at the highest levels of an organisation, as a manifestation of a male-centric power structure. Furthermore, existing literature suggests that the inclusion of women in leadership does not necessarily translate into systemic inclusivity, as many are appointed to roles with minimal decision-making authority (McCarthy et al., 2020). This perspective was reinforced by study participants, some of whom expressed the view that even when women attain senior leadership positions, they are frequently excluded from key decision-making processes. Their appointments are thus perceived as symbolic rather than as genuine efforts to dismantle male-dominated power structures within organisations (McCarthy et al., 2020).

Access to Informal Networks and Career Progression

The ‘boy’s club’ culture remains a deeply embedded artifact in many manufacturing firms, where informal mentorship and networking opportunities are largely inaccessible

to women (Ely et al., 2011). These informal structures function as gatekeepers to career advancement, restricting women's access to sponsorship opportunities and high-impact projects that are essential for leadership development. Mickey (2022), in his study of organisational behaviour, confirms that informal networks play a pivotal role in professional advancement, often exerting greater influence than formal mentorship programs, particularly when such programs lack structured implementation. The findings further suggest that men naturally gravitate toward one another within these networks, often inadvertently excluding women, thereby reinforcing systemic barriers to women's career progression in manufacturing environments.

6.2.2 Espoused Values - Stated Beliefs vs. Experienced Culture

Espoused values reflect an organisation's formal commitments to its culture, typically articulated through policies, mission statements, and diversity initiatives (Schein, 2010). According to Bourne et al. (2019), while these values represent the intended organisational culture, their alignment with employees' lived experiences can vary significantly. The findings indicate that although gender diversity and inclusion policies are formally established within manufacturing firms, the lived experiences of women managers suggest that these values are not consistently translated into practice. This disparity highlights the gap between formal commitments and the actual workplace culture, underscoring the challenges in fostering genuine inclusivity within the sector (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Disparity Between Policy and Practice

Participants frequently reported that while their organisations publicly commit to diversity through formal policies and gender equity programs, workplace norms continue to reinforce male dominance. Ely and Meyerson (2000) suggest that many organisations implement diversity policies as symbolic gestures rather than as instruments of meaningful structural change. The study further found that despite the establishment of gender diversity targets, organisations often fail to meet them, and in some cases, qualified women are overlooked for leadership positions due to persistent gender biases. These findings are consistent with Ely and Meyerson's (2000) argument that gendered workplace structures endure despite formal commitments to equity, as

organisations rarely challenge the deeply embedded norms that sustain male-dominated leadership hierarchies.

Cultural Endorsement of Exclusionary Practices

Women in managerial positions frequently report that their leadership styles are subject to greater scrutiny compared to their male counterparts, often resulting in pressure to adopt traditionally masculine leadership traits to be perceived as competent. This observation aligns with Downey et al. (2020) research, which highlights the prevailing cultural association between leadership and masculinity, thereby undermining women's authority in organisational settings. The findings further indicate that even at senior levels, women frequently encounter situations where their competence is questioned, and their presence in leadership roles is perceived as the result of diversity initiatives rather than merit. These results are consistent with McCarthy et al.'s (2020) discussion on tokenism, which suggests that women in leadership positions often experience heightened visibility and pressure to conform to established norms rather than leveraging their positions to introduce new perspectives.

Structural Reinforcement of Espoused Values

While organisations frequently assert their commitment to mentorship programs for women, these initiatives often lack substantive depth and fail to challenge the exclusionary dynamics of the prevailing 'boys club' culture (Smith et al., 2002). Women participants expressed concerns regarding the limited accessibility and structured implementation of such programs, noting that participation is often restricted to a select few rather than serving as a strategic intervention to address structural gender disparities. Additionally, the findings indicate that the underrepresentation of women in leadership further impedes their ability to establish mentorship or sponsorship relationships with senior male colleagues, thereby reinforcing existing gender barriers within the workplace. These findings are consistent with research which suggests that unless mentorship and sponsorship initiatives are meaningfully integrated into the organisational framework, they function as performative measures rather than as catalysts for meaningful gender transformation (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021).

The disconnect between espoused values and lived experiences highlights the need for organisations to critically assess how deeply rooted cultural behaviours influence the effectiveness of diversity initiatives. Without addressing the implicit norms that perpetuate exclusionary practices, diversity policies risk becoming performative rather than impactful (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021).

6.2.3 Underlying Assumptions - Deeply Ingrained Beliefs and Cultural Norms

Underlying assumptions constitute the most fundamental level of organisational culture, shaping implicit beliefs regarding gender roles, leadership, and workplace power dynamics (Schein, 2010). Within the manufacturing sector, these deeply ingrained assumptions contribute to the persistent divide between male and female employees, as cultural and gender biases are reinforced in an environment that remains predominantly male-dominated (Alwi & Sawitiri, 2022). Such assumptions influence workplace behaviour by determining which actions are encouraged, accepted, or marginalized, thereby shaping the broader organisational climate (Alwi & Sawitiri, 2022). Unlike artifacts and espoused values, which are visible and explicitly stated, underlying assumptions are often unarticulated and deeply embedded within the organisational psyche, making them particularly resistant to change (Schein, 2010).

Perceived Leadership Qualities and Gender Bias

The findings show that women believe that manufacturing firms continue to operate under the implicit assumption that effective leadership traits align with traditionally masculine qualities such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and decisiveness. Research by Manzi and Heilman (2021) supports this, demonstrating that women in leadership often face additional scrutiny because their leadership style may not conform to these traditional expectations. Many of the women felt that they had to work much harder than their male counterparts to be seen as competent, in some instances, even leading to women encountering imposter syndrome. The study findings align with work by Manzi and Heilman (2021), who highlights how deeply ingrained biases result in women being perceived as less competent than their male counterparts, regardless of objective performance.

Workplace Social Norms and Informal Power Structures

The assumption that informal workplace relationships play a critical role in career progression disadvantages women, as male-dominated social circles tend to exclude them from key networking opportunities (Mickey, 2022). This aligns with the findings in Chapter 5, where women managers reported that exclusion from informal networks limited their career advancement. Furthermore, there were several instances where women were undermined, and treated as though they did not belong. Literature by (Ely et al., 2011) supports the notion that access to mentorship and sponsorship opportunities is often dictated by underlying cultural assumptions about who is 'naturally' suited for leadership. The findings show that several microaggressions are prevalent in the manufacturing industry, and these fuel the perceived toxicity of the environment for women, in many instances, making it untenable.

Resistance to Structural Change

The findings show that there is an assumption that workplace structures should remain unchanged, despite the introduction of DEI policies, and this perpetuates resistance to gender inclusivity. Wedgewood's (2009) theory on gendered organisations suggests that many industries, including manufacturing, inherently favour male employees, making it difficult for women to navigate leadership pathways. The study findings further indicate that the resistance to structural change manifests in both overt and subtle ways, including the reinforcement of traditional job roles and implicit biases in hiring and promotion decisions.

Understanding the role of underlying assumptions in shaping workplace culture is crucial to addressing the systemic challenges faced by women managers in manufacturing (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). These deeply ingrained beliefs continue to influence how gender diversity and culture are perceived and operationalized within organisations (Schein, 2010). Du et al. (2022) contend that organisations function as pivotal institutions in driving societal change. Consequently, while they may not be directly accountable for the establishment of societal norms, they bear a degree of responsibility in addressing and mitigating their impacts.The next section will examine

how espoused values align, or fail to align, with these deeply held cultural assumptions and the observable artifacts within manufacturing firms.

6.3 Discussion of Findings for Research Question 2

Research Question 2 (RQ2) - How do women managers perceive the effectiveness of gender diversity initiatives in creating a more inclusive organisational culture?

The findings from RQ2 provide critical insights into the perceived effectiveness of gender DEI initiatives in the workplace, in creative a more gender inclusive organisational culture. In other words, are DEI initiatives assisting with cultural reforms in organisations? Four key themes emerged from Chapter 5 that are closely related to RQ2; (1) Superficial vs Structural DEI; Women's Role in Organisational Change, (2) Performative DEI & the Disconnect Between Policy and Practice, (3) Limited Sponsorship and Gendered Barriers to Career Progression, and (4) Cultural Resistance & the Slow Progress to DEI Initiatives. These themes underscore the challenges and limitations of gender DEI initiatives in fostering meaningful cultural transformation within organisations. Specifically, they highlight the gap between formal commitments to diversity and the lived experiences of women in the workplace.

6.3.1 Empirical Findings and Their Linkages to Literature

Superficial vs Structural DEI: Women's Role in Organisational Change

A predominant perspective among participants was that DEI initiatives are often superficial interventions rather than transformative structural reforms. While organisations publicly advocate for gender equity, participants reported that tangible actions aimed at dismantling systemic barriers remain insufficient. A key concern raised was the lack of transparency in organisational transformation plans, the absence of measurable targets, and ineffective communication surrounding DEI initiatives. These inadequacies were perceived as contributing to negative attitudes toward women, as male colleagues often questioned the legitimacy of gender-focused interventions. This observation aligns with the work of Dobbin and Kalev (2021), who argue that gender

diversity efforts must go beyond policy creation to address deeply embedded cultural biases that perpetuate gender disparities. However, contrary to Dobbin and Kalev's (2021) argument that organisations should actively dismantle systemic barriers, participants in this study noted that the responsibility for driving DEI initiatives was disproportionately placed on women. Women managers were expected to lead diversity committees, mentor junior female employees, and advocate for inclusivity, while male leaders remained largely disengaged from these efforts. This finding contrasts with broader literature on organisational change and DEI effectiveness, which suggests that diversity initiatives require collective engagement across all levels of the organisation, particularly from leadership (Brouwers and Paltu, 2020). The delegation of DEI efforts primarily to women not only reinforces gendered labour expectations but also suggests a symbolic rather than substantive commitment to change. Without active participation from senior leadership and male colleagues, diversity efforts risk becoming tokenistic, serving as a compliance-driven exercise rather than a catalyst for meaningful cultural transformation.

Performative DEI & the Disconnect Between Policy and Practice

Participants frequently cited examples of performative DEI efforts, where organisations appear committed to gender diversity but fail to implement meaningful changes. Common examples included; Organisations publicly celebrating "Women's Month" but failing to address gender pay disparities, gender diversity workshops that did not result in actionable policy shifts, and leadership statements endorsing DEI without accountability structures to measure progress. This reflects the critique of corporate diversity initiatives outlined by Dobbin and Kalev (2016), who argue that many organisations adopt DEI measures for reputational benefits rather than to drive substantive change. This phenomenon aligns with findings from Ahmed (2012), who highlights the symbolic nature of corporate diversity statements that lack enforcement mechanisms. However, some participants noted that their organisations had begun integrating DEI objectives into leadership performance metrics, demonstrating a departure from purely symbolic commitments. This finding aligns with research by Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006), who advocate for accountability-driven diversity programs.

The organisations that received the most positive feedback from participants had implemented a combination of structural and cultural changes aimed at fostering inclusivity. These measures included the following,

- Structured gender mentorship programs to provide targeted support for women's career progression.
- Succession and career planning for women, ensuring that leadership pipelines were intentionally inclusive.
- Transparent feedback sessions that engaged both male and female employees, ensuring that DEI initiatives were clearly communicated, and concerns were addressed proactively.
- Direct engagement with male employees to address concerns regarding DEI initiatives and emphasize their broader organisational benefits.

These approaches align with best practices identified by Tran (2021), who argue that effective DEI strategies require a combination of policy implementation, leadership commitment, and transparent communication to drive genuine structural and cultural change. Tran (2021) asserts that an effective initial step involves conducting cultural audits, which function as qualitative diagnostic tools aimed at identifying structural and cultural barriers while facilitating the development of actionable strategies for organisational improvement. The proactive involvement of leadership in these organisations also supports insights from NG and Sears (2020), who highlight the importance of top-down accountability in embedding diversity efforts within organisational culture.

Limited Sponsorship and Gendered Barriers to Career Progression

The findings indicate that many women managers continue to experience a lack of sponsorship opportunities, which impedes their career advancement. Participants reported that while formal mentorship programs exist, they often lack the sponsorship component that helps women secure high-visibility assignments and leadership roles. This aligns with research by Mcilongo and Strydom (2021), who highlight the importance of sponsorship over mentorship in fostering women's career progression. However, while the literature suggests that sponsorship is a critical enabler of advancement for

women, some participants reported that they actively avoided sponsorship opportunities due to concerns over perceived favouritism, which in some cases was misconstrued as having romantic implications (The researcher identified this as an under-explored dynamic, as existing literature predominantly examines sexual harassment within the context of the workplace environment). This contradicts existing research, such as that of Tran (2021), which suggests that structured sponsorship programs lead to improved gender parity in leadership. Additionally, the study found that women managers expressed a strong preference for female mentors, as they perceived female leaders to have a better understanding of the unique challenges women face in male-dominated industries. However, the lack of female representation at senior leadership levels was identified as an additional barrier, as it indirectly constrained access to effective mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. Research by Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) reinforces this finding, highlighting that gender disparities in leadership not only limit career progression opportunities for women but also reduce the availability of role models who can provide strategic guidance for navigating organisational culture.

Cultural Resistance & the Slow Progress to DEI Initiatives

Despite the presence of DEI policies, cultural resistance to gender inclusivity remains a significant barrier. Participants expressed frustration over male colleagues who resist DEI efforts, viewing them as unnecessary or as giving women an unfair advantage. This aligns with Acker's (2006) theory on gendered organisations, which suggests that resistance to structural change is an inherent feature of male-dominated industries. However, an unexpected finding was that some participants viewed this resistance as a symptom of broader organisational inertia (doing things the way they have always done them) rather than direct opposition to gender diversity. This suggests that resistance may not always stem from explicit biases but from an organisation's overall difficulty in adapting to change. One participant mentioned that people were just not used to behaving differently in their organisations to how they behave in society. Participants further noted that their organisations struggled with implementing transformation initiatives in general, whether related to gender diversity, technological advancements, or structural shifts. This aligns with Buse's (2016) theory, which

emphasizes that sustainable organisational transformation requires both leadership-driven change initiatives and cultural reinforcement.

Several participants highlighted that their organisations were heavily performance-driven, and as such, flexibility and adaptability were prioritized over sustained DEI commitments. In environments where business imperatives dominate decision-making, diversity initiatives are often deprioritized unless they are explicitly linked to performance metrics or strategic goals, with some participants mentioning that the organisation was aware of their underperformance in gender transformation, but it was not an immediate priority to change. This perspective suggests that gender diversity resistance is often symptomatic of a broader reluctance to deviate from established norms and processes, rather than outright opposition to gender equity itself. While Acker's (2006) theory highlights gendered organisational structures as a primary source of resistance, these findings imply that organisations with entrenched bureaucratic systems may inadvertently hinder diversity efforts due to their slow adaptability to change. This nuance provides a valuable perspective for future DEI strategies, indicating that successful implementation requires integrating gender diversity within broader change management frameworks.

The findings from RQ2 highlight that while gender DEI initiatives exist in many manufacturing organisations, their effectiveness in driving cultural transformation remains limited. The themes explored in this section demonstrate that gender diversity efforts often remain symbolic rather than structural, and that cultural resistance continues to hinder progress. While some organisations are beginning to implement accountability-driven DEI policies, challenges persist in bridging the gap between formal commitments and real workplace experiences.

6.4 Discussion of Findings for Research Question 3

Research Question 3 (RQ3) - How do women's perceptions of the gender inclusivity of the organisational culture influence their intention to leave or stay?

The findings from RQ3 provide insights into women's intention to leave or stay over the perceived gender inclusivity of their organisation's organisational culture. Four key

themes emerged from Chapter 5 that are closely related to RQ3; (1) Why do Women Stay or Leave?: Cultural Barriers to Retention, (2) Unequal Leadership Pathways and the Culture of Exclusion, and (3) A Culture of Silence: Psychological Safety, Harassment and Microaggressions. The analysis of these themes provides insights into the structural, cultural, and psychological factors that influence women's career decisions within manufacturing organisations.

6.4.1 Why Do Women Stay or Leave? Cultural Barriers to Retention

Participants highlighted that organisational culture plays a crucial role in retention decisions. Women managers who perceived their organisations as inclusive and supportive of their leadership aspirations were more likely to remain, while those who experienced exclusionary workplace practices, limited career growth, and gendered biases were more inclined to leave. The findings align with Ward et al. (2022), who argue that retention challenges for women in male-dominated industries are not merely a result of external labour market factors but stem from internal workplace cultures that marginalize female employees. One participant mentioned that employees don’t generally leave because of their organisation, but rather the people they work with and the working environment they create. Participants further cited lack of flexible work arrangements, biases in performance evaluations, and limited access to strategic projects as factors influencing their career decisions. However, some participants noted that certain organisational policies, such as gender quotas and leadership development programs, had positively influenced their decision to stay. This contrasts with literature by Mensi-Klarbach and Seierstad (2020), which suggests that while quotas increase representation, they often fail to create an inclusive culture that supports long-term retention. Instead, participants emphasized the importance of mentorship, clear career progression pathways, and leadership accountability in sustaining gender diversity.

6.4.2 Unequal Leadership Pathways and the Culture of Exclusion

A major factor contributing to women’s intention to leave was the perceived lack of equitable leadership pathways. Participants reported that promotions often depended on informal networks, which were predominantly male dominated, leading to limited access for women. The findings reinforce Smith et al. (2002), who asserts that women

face a double burden in leadership development, not only must they prove their competence in a male-centric work environment, but they must also navigate exclusion from key decision-making forums. Participants reported that leadership criteria were often ambiguous, creating barriers for women who did not have sponsors advocating for their advancement. Additionally, Ward et al.'s (2022) research is reflected in the findings, as participants noted that women in leadership were often isolated, lacking the same degree of peer support as their male counterparts. Women managers who did advance often found themselves bearing the additional burden of representing all women within the organisation, which contributed to leadership fatigue and, in some cases, resignation. However, some participants expressed optimism about emerging inclusive leadership initiatives. Companies that had implemented structured sponsorship programs, leadership accountability for DEI, and targeted development plans for women were perceived as fostering better career advancement opportunities. Furthermore, participants feel that companies must communicate these leadership paths transparently to avoid unnecessary ill-feelings from their male counterparts. These findings align with Menzi-Klarbach and Seierstad (2020), who highlights that structured leadership development programs increase the likelihood of women remaining in organisations by addressing career stagnation.

6.4.3 A Culture of Silence: Psychological Safety, Sexual Harassment, and Microaggressions

A critical determinant influencing women's career trajectories is the extent of psychological safety within their respective organisations. Participants in this study reported that raising concerns regarding gender biases, sexual harassment, or workplace inequities was frequently met with resistance or adverse professional consequences. These findings align with Clark's (2020) theory of psychological safety, which posits that employees are less likely to voice concerns in environments where dissent is discouraged or penalized. The data suggest that organisations that fail to establish secure channels for reporting discrimination experience elevated turnover rates among female employees. This trend is attributed to the perception that such environments are unsafe and that organisational leadership is unwilling to address these concerns effectively. Several participants expressed a reluctance to formally

report instances of discrimination due to apprehensions about reputational damage, retaliation, or being labelled as overly sensitive. This fear of victimization further discourages engagement with formal grievance mechanisms. Additionally, microaggressions emerged as a persistent issue, with respondents citing exclusion from key decision-making forums, dismissive behaviour from male colleagues, and the undermining of their leadership authority as significant contributors to their inclination to exit their organisations. These findings support the work of Folke and Rickne (2022), who assert that microaggressions impose a cumulative psychological burden that can ultimately drive women out of leadership positions. However, some participants highlighted that organisations with clearly defined anti-sexual harassment policies and robust human resource (HR) accountability mechanisms fostered higher levels of psychological safety and overall workplace satisfaction. This finding corroborates research by Cortina and Areguin (2021), who suggest that organisations with transparent and enforceable grievance procedures experience lower attrition rates among marginalized employees. Furthermore, respondents emphasized the pervasive nature of sexual harassment within the manufacturing sector and underscored the need for enhanced training initiatives aimed at educating all employees on appropriate workplace conduct.

6.4.4 Implications for Organisational Culture and Retention Strategies

The findings suggest that gender inclusivity within organisational culture is a critical determinant of women's retention. While policy-based DEI efforts such as gender quotas and mentorship programs have yielded incremental progress, they remain insufficient without cultural shifts that promote psychological safety, equitable leadership pathways, and proactive leadership accountability. The study underscores the importance of addressing systemic biases that influence women's career trajectories. Organisations that fail to tackle exclusionary leadership cultures, informal power structures, and workplace sexual harassment risk losing top female talent, further perpetuating gender disparities in leadership. Conversely, firms that embed inclusivity within their core cultural framework, through leadership accountability, structured sponsorship, and a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination, demonstrate stronger retention outcomes. This aligns with findings from Ely and Meyerson (2000), who argue

that sustainable DEI efforts require deep-seated cultural transformation rather than surface-level policy interventions.

The findings from RQ3 highlight that women's perceptions of workplace gender inclusivity strongly influence their intention to stay or leave. The cultural barriers to retention, lack of equitable leadership pathways, and absence of psychological safety create significant obstacles for women in manufacturing leadership roles. Organisations seeking to reduce attrition and foster gender diversity in leadership must go beyond policy interventions and focus on creating a deeply embedded culture of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability.

6.5 Key Implications

The findings highlight a range of critical implications for organisational policies, leadership practices, and DEI strategies aimed at fostering a more inclusive manufacturing sector. These implications are particularly relevant in addressing systemic barriers to gender equity in leadership and ensuring that DEI initiatives translate into meaningful cultural transformation rather than remain symbolic commitments.

6.5.1 Addressing Gendered Leadership Expectations

One of the most pressing implications is the need for organisational policies to explicitly challenge gendered leadership expectations. Traditional leadership norms in manufacturing continue to privilege masculine-coded traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness, often marginalizing alternative leadership styles commonly associated with women (Menzi & Heilman, 2021). Participants expressed frustration at the narrow definitions of leadership that exclude more collaborative, empathetic, or transformational leadership styles, which have been shown to be equally effective in driving organisational success (Menzi & Heilman, 2021).

To dismantle these cultural biases, organisations must implement inclusive leadership training programs, redefine promotion criteria, and enforce transparent leadership selection processes that recognize diverse leadership competencies. Without these structural reforms, women will continue to face implicit biases that hinder their career

advancement, despite formal DEI policies advocating for gender equity (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020).

6.5.2 Integrating Bias-Awareness Training into Leadership Development

Another key implication is the necessity of bias-awareness training to counter unconscious biases that shape hiring and promotion decisions. Research by Hoobler et al. (2018) demonstrates that implicit biases continue to influence perceptions of leadership competence, disadvantaging women in predominantly male-dominated industries. The findings suggest that organisational leaders often make promotion and sponsorship decisions based on ingrained gendered assumptions rather than meritocratic evaluations.

To mitigate these biases, bias-awareness training must be integrated into leadership development programs, performance evaluations, and decision-making processes. Furthermore, companies should implement structured accountability measures that require managers to justify hiring and promotion decisions based on objective competency frameworks rather than subjective perceptions.

6.5.3 Strengthening Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs

The study findings underscore the importance of mentorship and sponsorship programs in advancing women's careers in manufacturing. While mentorship provides women with career guidance, sponsorship is particularly critical in ensuring that women gain access to high-impact leadership opportunities (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Participants highlighted that the absence of structured mentorship and sponsorship programs within their organisations limits career progression, contributing to the exclusion of women from key leadership networks.

Participants communicated that organisations must prioritize formal sponsorship initiatives that ensure women have direct access to leadership networks, career-enhancing opportunities, and strategic assignments.

6.5.4 Enhancing Psychological Safety in Workplace Culture

A critical implication of this study is the role of psychological safety in shaping women's career decisions and retention. Participants reported that fear of retaliation, reputational damage, and being labelled as overly sensitive discouraged them from raising concerns about gender bias, harassment, and microaggressions. Research by Ward et al. (2022) highlights that organisations lacking psychological safety experience higher turnover rates among marginalized employees, as employees feel unsupported in addressing workplace inequities. To enhance psychological safety, organisations must establish clear anti-harassment policies, anonymous grievance mechanisms, and visible leadership commitment to addressing gender-related issues.

6.5.5 Embedding Accountability into DEI Strategies

The findings reveal a critical gap in accountability mechanisms for DEI initiatives. Many participants reported that DEI policies exist primarily as symbolic or tokenistic gestures rather than enforceable commitments. This aligns with McCarthy et al. (2020), who argue that perceived tokenistic DEI initiatives exacerbate workplace inequalities, and reinforce frustration and attrition among women, who perceive their presence as performative rather than transformative.

To ensure meaningful implementation of gender equity efforts, participants outlined that organisations must,

1. Tie DEI objectives to leadership performance metrics, ensuring that managers are evaluated on their commitment to fostering inclusive teams.
2. Establish independent DEI oversight committees responsible for tracking gender representation, promotion trends, and workplace climate.
3. Implement measurable progress indicators linked to DEI outcomes, rather than relying on diversity quotas alone. (bring in the feedback issue – qualitative measures)
4. Furthermore, organisations should prioritize qualitative approaches to data collection, such as feedback sessions, cultural audits, and focus group discussions. These methods provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of women within organisations, as qualitative measures are more effective in capturing the complexities and nuances of their perspectives (Nishii, 2013).

6.5.6 Conducting Regular Organisational Culture Audits

A recurring issue identified in this study is the disconnect between espoused DEI values and actual workplace culture. While formal policies advocate for gender inclusion, informal power structures and workplace norms continue to undermine these commitments (Tran, 2021). Participants highlighted that gender DEI efforts lack long-term evaluation mechanisms, making it difficult to assess their effectiveness. Regular organisational culture audits should be conducted to measure the impact of DEI initiatives on workplace dynamics, gather qualitative and quantitative data on women's lived experiences in leadership, ensure leadership accountability for cultural transformation, and identify gaps between DEI policies and their real-world implementation.

6.5.7 Implications for Organisational Culture Theory

This study contributes to organisational culture theory, particularly Schein's model of organisational culture (2010), by illustrating the disconnect between artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions in gender DEI initiatives. While many organisations publicly commit to gender inclusivity (espoused values), their artifacts (leadership structures, promotion policies) and underlying assumptions (implicit biases about women's leadership competence) contradict these commitments.

The study further highlights that underlying assumptions operate at the following two levels,

Organisational-level assumptions

These include biases about leadership roles, workplace norms, and performance expectations. Organisations have direct control over these assumptions through leadership interventions, training, and policy reforms.

Societal-level assumptions

These are deeply ingrained cultural and gender norms that extend beyond the workplace. Organisations alone cannot fully resolve these, as they require broader systemic change through education, policy advocacy, and social transformation initiatives.

To drive meaningful gender inclusivity**,** organisations must address internal cultural assumptions while also advocating for broader societal change**.** Furthermore, accountability and psychological safety must be integrated into Schein's framework, as these factors directly influence the effectiveness of cultural transformation efforts. The findings suggest that without embedding accountability measures and fostering psychological safety, DEI initiatives remain superficial and fail to dismantle systemic gender barriers.

The diagram presented on page 113 labelled Figure 3 illustrates an adaptation of Schein's (2010) model of organisational culture, as derived from the findings of this study. At the uppermost level of the model are the observable artifacts, which encompass the tangible and visible manifestations of the organisation's culture (Byrne et al., 2022). These artifacts serve as indicators of the extent to which structural DEI initiatives are effectively implemented (Lam et al., 2021). Key manifestations include gender representation at leadership levels, formalized mentorship programs, inclusive informal networks, and demonstrable leadership trust in women within the organisation (Byrne et al., 2022). The visibility of these elements provides insight into whether DEI efforts translate into meaningful change.

Beneath this layer are the espoused values, which represent the organisation's self-proclaimed identity and stated principles (Bourne et al., 2019). This level reflects the easiest form of compliance, as it requires minimal substantive action for organisations to project an image aligned with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Borne et al., 2019).

However, akin to the iceberg metaphor in cultural analysis, the most profound and pervasive challenges in organisational culture exist at the level of underlying assumptions (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). At this foundational level, deeply ingrained beliefs and unconscious biases shape workplace dynamics. Issues such as microaggressions, psychological unsafety, tolerance of sexual harassment, the systematic undermining of female competence, and a lack of accountability for discriminatory behaviours are embedded within the organisation's cultural fabric (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). These implicit norms and assumptions are the most resistant to

change yet constitute the most critical dimension for fostering a genuinely inclusive organisational culture (Boulware et al., 2022). Achieving sustainable cultural transformation necessitates interventions targeting this deepest level (Boulware et al., 2022). Without addressing the underlying assumptions that perpetuate exclusionary practices, organisational DEI efforts risk being superficial, failing to drive substantive progress toward inclusivity and equity (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). Therefore, meaningful cultural reform must move beyond mere representation and structural policies to challenge and reconstruct the implicit norms that govern workplace interactions.

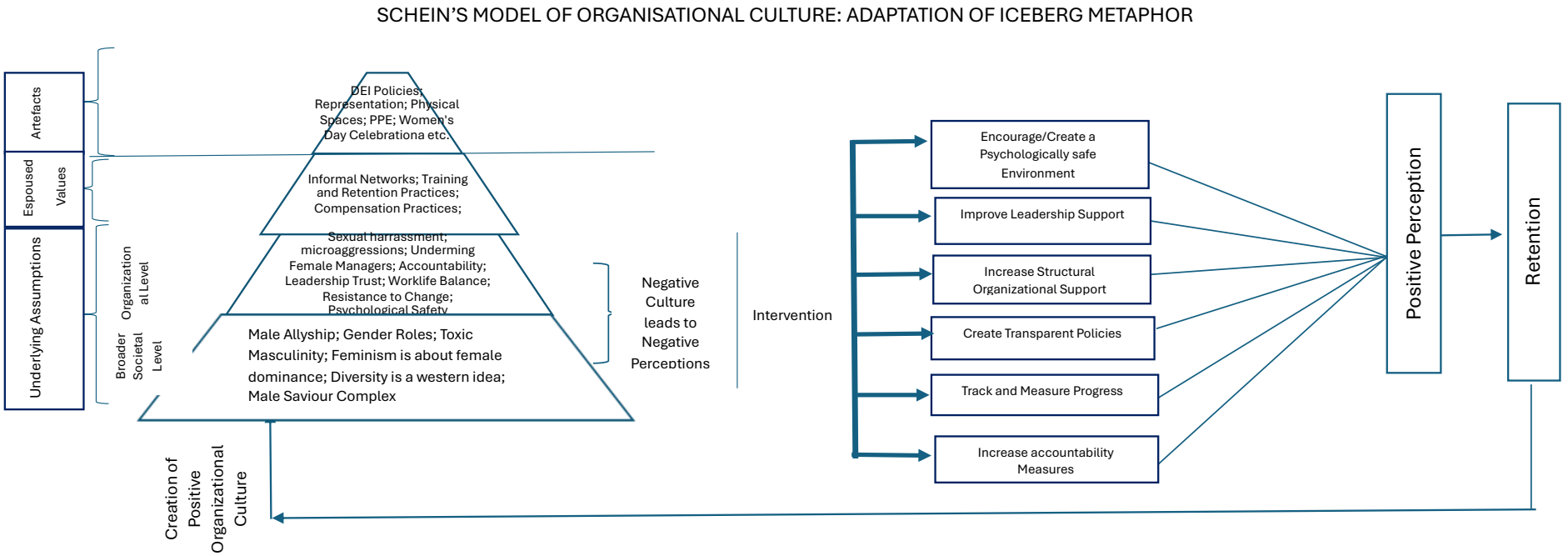

Figure 3 - Proposed Conceptual Model (GIOT)

6.6 Contribution to Academics from Study

This study provides a critical contribution to the academic discourse on gender diversity, organisational culture, and leadership by advancing theoretical frameworks and offering a structured model in Figure 3 above that organisations can employ to assist dismantle entrenched gender disparities. While existing literature on gender diversity in organisations often emphasizes structural barriers, policy reforms, and leadership representation, this study delves deeper into the cultural and psychological dimensions that underpin workplace inequality. Specifically, it challenges and extends existing organisational culture models by proposing a new conceptual layer, hegemonic value systems, that operates beneath Schein's (2010) foundational model of organisational culture. Schein's widely cited model of organisational culture posits that culture exists at three interdependent levels: artifacts (visible symbols and practices), espoused values (stated beliefs and policies), and underlying assumptions (unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs that shape behaviour).

However, this study reveals that underlying assumptions, while deeply embedded, may themselves be influenced by an even more entrenched layer of culture, hegemonic value systems. This finding is grounded in the research of Downey et al. (2020), who argue that hegemonic value systems influence societal institutions and organisational culture by embedding dominant ideological assumptions. These are broader societal norms, ideologies, and power structures that shape how organisations and individuals construct meaning around gender, leadership, and workplace roles. These entrenched norms often reinforce structural inequalities, disproportionately disadvantaging marginalized groups, such as women in this context (Downey et al., 2020). Unlike underlying assumptions, which organisations can actively reshape through internal cultural change, hegemonic value systems are socially constructed and reinforced at a macro level, often transcending individual organisations and industries (Downey et al., 2020). This distinction is crucial because it explains why many DEI efforts fail to yield substantive change; organisations frequently attempt to modify visible artifacts and espoused values without addressing the deeply ingrained societal constructs that sustain gender disparities (Wang et al., 2024).

This study posits that presence of hegemonic value systems means that organisational change efforts must be twofold; first, addressing internal cultural

transformation by reshaping assumptions about gender and leadership within the organisation, and second, recognizing and actively countering external hegemonic forces that perpetuate workplace inequities. This study builds on existing research in gender studies and organisational behaviour by arguing that leadership bias, exclusion from informal networks, and perceptions of female leadership as "non-normative" are not merely the result of workplace culture but are also manifestations of larger social ideologies (McCarthy et al., 2020). Thus, to create gender-inclusive workplaces, organisations must adopt interventions that challenge gender norms both within and beyond the workplace (Lenberg et al., 2019).

This research thus offers the Gender-Inclusive Organisational Transformation (GIOT) model presented in Figure 3 above as a practical framework for organisations seeking to implement effective, sustainable change in gender diversity, moving beyond surface-level diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) commitments to drive genuine cultural transformation.

Building on these insights, the study has introduced GIOT Model, a comprehensive framework designed to address gender disparities through a multi-level approach, which is adapted from Schein's Model of Organisational Culture. Unlike traditional DEI strategies that focus primarily on policy changes or leadership representation, the GIOT Model emphasizes cultural, structural, and psychological interventions that operate at all levels of an organisation's culture. This adaptation of Schein's model extends the framework by incorporating the broader societal level, recognizing that organisational culture does not function in isolation but is influenced by external societal norms, gender stereotypes, and cultural biases. The application of the iceberg metaphor in this context highlights the ways in which deeply embedded societal beliefs influence workplace culture and gender DEI outcomes. The model is thus structured across three key dimensions: the organisational level, which includes internal culture, policies, and leadership influence on workplace DEI; the broader societal level, which considers the external forces shaping workplace culture; and intervention strategies, which outline mechanisms that can facilitate cultural shifts towards gender inclusivity and equity. This adaptation of Schein's model offers a comprehensive framework for organisations seeking to analyse, understand, and transform their workplace culture in support of gender diversity, equity, and inclusion. By integrating artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions while acknowledging broader societal influences, the model serves as a practical guide

for fostering sustainable cultural change. Organisations that systematically implement these interventions can break down gender barriers, improve psychological safety and retention, and ultimately build a more inclusive and diverse workforce. The model suggests that the implementation of intervention measures may contribute to more favourable perceptions of organisational culture among women, potentially leading to improved retention rates within the organisation. By situating gender disparities within a broader socio-cultural framework and offering a multi-level intervention model, this study provides a contribution to the academic literature on organisational culture, gender, and leadership. It underscores the need for organisations to move beyond policy-level DEI initiatives and commit to transformational change that addresses the structural and cultural roots of gender inequality. Future research should build on these findings by examining how hegemonic value systems operate across different cultural and industrial contexts and developing scalable models for institutionalizing gender equity at both the organisational and societal levels.

6.7 Concluding Synthesis and Practical Implications

6.7.1 A Holistic Reflection on Organisational Culture and Gender DEI

The study's findings highlight that while DEI initiatives have made progress in increasing representation, their effectiveness remains constrained by entrenched organisational cultures, informal power dynamics, and structural inequalities. The persistence of male-dominated leadership norms and informal networking exclusions suggests that gender DEI in manufacturing requires systemic transformation rather than isolated policy interventions (Van Laer et al., 2021). The study reinforces that women in manufacturing often experience misalignment between expected leadership attributes and their perceived capabilities, creating persistent career advancement challenges (Heilman, et al., 2024).

6.7.2 Practical Implications for Manufacturing Organisations

The findings suggest that a shift from compliance-driven DEI efforts to holistic cultural transformation is essential for meaningful progress (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Organisations must focus on embedding gender-inclusive leadership norms, redefining leadership evaluation frameworks to accommodate diverse leadership styles, and ensuring that DEI initiatives are integrated into strategic decision-making processes rather than being treated as supplementary HR functions (Van Laer et al., 2021).

To achieve this, executive leadership commitment must move beyond rhetoric to action, with clear accountability measures and performance-linked DEI incentives (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Implementing structured mentorship and sponsorship programs, particularly targeting women in mid-career stages, will facilitate equitable career progression (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Organisations must also invest in bias mitigation training that goes beyond awareness-building, focusing instead on practical behavioural shifts and inclusive decision-making (Tran, 2021).

6.7.3 Policy Recommendations for Industry-Wide Change

Beyond individual organisations, the study suggests that industry-wide policy frameworks must be strengthened to enforce gender DEI commitments across the manufacturing sector. Regulatory bodies and industry associations should advocate for standardised gender-equity cultural auditing mechanisms, similar to financial audits, ensuring that organisations remain accountable for their diversity commitments (Ely & Thomas, 2020).

Furthermore, government and industry stakeholders should collaborate to develop incentivised DEI funding structures, supporting firms that actively invest in gender-inclusive leadership development programs. Encouraging public-private partnerships in promoting STEM education and technical training for women will also contribute to a longer-term shift in industry demographics, reducing the barriers to leadership for future generations of women in manufacturing.

6.7.4 Future Research Directions and Final Thoughts

While this study provides a comprehensive exploration of organisational culture and gender DEI in manufacturing, future research should explore longitudinal analyses of DEI strategy effectiveness, tracking organisations over extended periods to assess how policy implementation translates into cultural transformation. Additionally, examining cross-industry comparisons could provide insights into

whether lessons from more gender-equitable industries can be applied to manufacturing.

In conclusion, the study underscores that achieving genuine gender diversity and inclusion in manufacturing leadership requires sustained commitment, structural change, and cultural evolution. The findings contribute to the growing body of research on gender DEI in male-dominated industries, offering actionable pathways for manufacturing firms to transition from symbolic diversity initiatives to embedded inclusive practices. The next chapter will synthesise the overall conclusions of this research and propose specific recommendations to guide organisations toward a more equitable and inclusive manufacturing landscape.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This research sought to examine the influence of organisational culture on women's perceptions of gender diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives within the South African manufacturing sector. Using Schein's (2010) Model of Organisational Culture as a guiding theoretical framework, the study analysed how cultural artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions shape women's experiences in leadership roles.

The findings reveal that despite the implementation of DEI policies, deeply entrenched cultural norms and informal power structures continue to impede women's career progression and sense of belonging in manufacturing leadership. These systemic barriers manifest through exclusion from informal networks, the persistence of gender stereotypes, and a lack of leadership accountability in enforcing inclusive practices. This chapter synthesises the study's key findings, discusses their academic and practical contributions, and provides recommendations for organisations seeking to foster a more inclusive culture.

7.2 Summary of Key Findings

7.2.1 The Experience of Women in Manufacturing Culture

The first research question sought to examine how women managers experience organisational culture within the manufacturing sector. The study found that manufacturing remains a male-dominated industry where women frequently encounter implicit biases, microaggressions, and systemic barriers that hinder their progression (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Women reported that they often face cultural stereotypes that perceive leadership as a traditionally male role, leading to difficulties in gaining credibility and career advancement. These experiences create an environment where women must continuously prove their competence, leading to increased psychological stress and barriers to leadership progression (Smith et al., 2002).

A significant challenge identified was the exclusion of women from informal decision-making networks, which limits their visibility and access to high-impact leadership opportunities (McCarthy et al., 2020). Women also reported a lack of mentorship and

sponsorship from senior leaders, which further exacerbates the gender gap in leadership positions. These findings align with previous studies that highlight how the absence of female representation in key leadership circles creates a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion, making it difficult for women to break through the upper ranks of manufacturing organisations (Folke & Rickne, 2022).

Furthermore, cultural norms within manufacturing organisations continue to privilege traditionally masculine leadership styles, which results in the marginalisation of women who do not conform to these expectations (Menzi & Heilman, 2021). This entrenched cultural bias makes it difficult for gender diversity initiatives to achieve meaningful change (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020). As a result, many women feel that they must adapt to a masculine leadership style to succeed, leading to identity conflicts and limiting authentic leadership expression (Menzi & Heilman, 2021).

7.2.2 Perceptions of Gender Diversity Initiatives

The second research question explored how women managers perceive the effectiveness of gender diversity initiatives within their organisations. The findings indicate that while many organisations have implemented DEI policies, these initiatives are often perceived as superficial and ineffective in addressing deep-rooted cultural barriers (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). Women expressed scepticism regarding the genuine commitment of their organisations to gender diversity, as many initiatives appear to be designed primarily for compliance purposes rather than as part of a meaningful transformation effort.

A key concern raised by participants was the lack of enforcement and accountability in DEI programs. Many organisations introduce gender diversity policies but fail to implement mechanisms to track progress, measure success, or address non-compliance (Ely & Thomas, 2020). This lack of accountability results in an environment where gender diversity efforts remain symbolic, with little tangible impact on organisational culture.

Another issue is the disconnect between DEI initiatives and the lived experiences of women in leadership (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021). Many organisations rely on quantitative metrics, such as hiring targets, to measure gender diversity, without addressing the qualitative aspects of workplace inclusion (Tran, 2021). Participants reported that while hiring more women into leadership positions is important, it does

not automatically translate into an inclusive workplace culture. Without addressing the exclusionary norms and biases embedded within organisational culture, gender diversity initiatives fail to create sustainable change (Manzi & Heilman, 2021).

Participants also expressed concerns about tokenism, noting that some organisations promote women into leadership positions to improve diversity statistics without providing them with genuine authority or influence. This phenomenon creates frustration among women leaders, as they feel their contributions are undervalued and their roles are not taken seriously (McCarthy et al., 2020). The findings highlight the urgent need for DEI programs to be coupled with structural and cultural reforms that foster genuine inclusion, rather than merely fulfilling diversity quotas (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020).

7.2.3 Gender Inclusivity and Career Intentions

The third research question examined how perceptions of gender inclusivity influence women's decisions to remain in or leave their organisations. The findings suggest that a workplace culture that lacks genuine inclusivity significantly influences career decisions and turnover intentions among women managers (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020). Women who experience persistent exclusion, bias, and limited career progression opportunities are more likely to consider leaving their organisations in search of more inclusive work environments (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020).

A major factor influencing retention is the absence of structured career advancement pathways for women in leadership (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020). Many participants indicated that despite their qualifications and experience, they often face unclear promotion criteria or are overlooked for leadership roles due to implicit biases in the selection process. This lack of transparency in promotion and leadership development fuels dissatisfaction and discourages women from remaining in their organisations (McCarthy et al., 2020).

Furthermore, participants noted that psychological safety plays a crucial role in retention. Organisations that do not foster an environment where women feel safe to voice concerns, challenge exclusionary practices, or seek mentorship create an atmosphere of isolation and disengagement (Ward et al., 2022). Without psychological safety, women are less likely to remain in organisations that do not actively support their professional growth (Clark, 2020).

A recurring theme in the study was the role of leadership in shaping perceptions of inclusivity. Organisations where senior leadership actively advocates for gender diversity and inclusion tend to retain women leaders at higher rates (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Conversely, organisations that lack leadership commitment to cultural transformation struggle with high turnover among women managers (Ward et al., 2022). The participants highlighted that meaningful inclusivity requires visible, sustained leadership support, as well as policies that go beyond symbolic gestures to actively address systemic barriers to women's advancement.

7.3 Contributions of the Study

7.3.1 Theoretical Contributions

This research extends the application of Schein's (2010) Model of Organisational Culture by illustrating how cultural artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions interact to either support or hinder gender inclusivity. This study demonstrates that while underlying assumptions within organisational culture are deeply ingrained, they are themselves shaped by an even more fundamental layer of culture—hegemonic value systems. This insight aligns with the work of Downey et al. (2020), who assert that hegemonic value systems permeate societal institutions and organisational cultures by embedding dominant ideological frameworks. These overarching societal norms, ideologies, and power structures influence how gender, leadership, and workplace roles are conceptualized within organisations (Downey et al., 2020).

7.3.2 Empirical Contributions

Through qualitative inquiry, this study provides a nuanced understanding of women's lived experiences in the manufacturing sector. Unlike many previous studies that primarily focus on quantitative assessments of gender diversity, this research captures the complexities of workplace culture through in-depth participant narratives. The empirical findings challenge the assumption that DEI policies alone can drive meaningful change, instead highlighting the necessity of cultural transformation strategies that address informal power dynamics.

7.3.3 Practical Contributions

The study offers practical recommendations for manufacturing organisations aiming to enhance gender diversity and inclusivity. By identifying key structural and cultural

barriers, the findings provide a roadmap for organisations to move beyond compliance-driven DEI efforts and towards transformative change. The emphasis on leadership accountability, mentorship programs, and cultural audits underscores the need for a holistic approach that aligns formal policies with organisational realities.

7.4 Implications for Organisations

7.4.1 Leadership Accountability and Cultural Transformation

To achieve genuine gender inclusivity, manufacturing organisations must embed DEI commitments within leadership performance metrics. Executives should be held accountable for driving cultural change, ensuring that gender diversity is not merely a compliance requirement but an integral component of organisational success (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

7.4.2 Strengthening Informal Networks and Mentorship

Given the role of social capital in career progression, organisations should implement structured mentorship and sponsorship programs to bridge the gap between male-dominated leadership circles and aspiring women leaders (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). These programs should be designed to facilitate meaningful engagement rather than superficial networking opportunities.

7.4.3 Enhancing Measurement and Evaluation of DEI Initiatives

DEI initiatives should be rigorously evaluated to assess their impact beyond representation statistics. The study revealed that organisations must implement robust monitoring frameworks that track retention rates, feedback mechanisms, career advancement trends, and cultural audits that use qualitative measures to understand employee perceptions of inclusivity.

7.5 Recommendations for Future Research

While significant strides have been made in examining the dynamics of organisational culture and its influence on women's perceptions of gender diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the manufacturing sector, several critical gaps persist that warrant further scholarly attention. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing a nuanced understanding of how organisational culture shapes DEI

outcomes, particularly through Schein's foundational model of culture. A more comprehensive approach is needed to explore the interaction between deeply embedded cultural assumptions and women's lived experiences within DEI frameworks in manufacturing.

7.5.1 Expanding the Analysis of Embedded Cultural Assumptions

Existing research predominantly emphasises tangible cultural artifacts and espoused values, often neglecting the more profound, underlying assumptions that constitute the core of organisational culture (Schein, 2010). These subconscious beliefs significantly influence perceptions and behaviours yet remain underexplored in the context of DEI initiatives. Future research should aim to bridge this gap by conducting qualitative and mixed-method studies that investigate how these deep-seated cultural norms impact women's experiences of inclusivity, career advancement, and engagement with DEI policies. Studies such as Manzi and Heilman (2021) highlight that unconscious assumptions can either reinforce or undermine DEI efforts; thus, examining these aspects is essential for achieving meaningful change.

7.5.2 Incorporating Intersectionality in DEI Research

The intersectional nature of identity is crucial for understanding how overlapping social categorizations affect individual experiences within organisational cultures. Current DEI research often fails to comprehensively address how intersectional identities, such as race, socioeconomic status, and age, interact with gender within manufacturing environments. Future studies should adopt a multi-dimensional approach, integrating variables that capture these diverse perspectives to enhance the applicability and effectiveness of DEI strategies. This focus on intersectionality is not only academically rigorous but also provides practical insights for tailoring DEI initiatives to the unique needs of different subgroups of women.

7.5.3 Longitudinal Studies for Sustained DEI Impact Assessment

While short-term studies often demonstrate immediate impacts, the enduring influence of DEI strategies on organisational culture and women's retention and career progression is less frequently examined. Longitudinal research that tracks

DEI policy outcomes over extended periods could reveal critical insights into which strategies deliver sustained benefits. Such studies would offer a robust evidence base for organisations seeking to refine their DEI initiatives to support long-term inclusivity and gender parity.

7.5.4 Comparative Industry Studies for Cross-Sectoral Insights

Conducting comparative analyses between the manufacturing sector and other industries that have made substantial progress in gender diversity could illuminate unique challenges and successful strategies. Future research should explore cross-sectoral best practices through comparative case studies, enabling the identification of adaptable solutions that can enhance DEI outcomes in the manufacturing sector.

7.5.5 Evaluating the Practical Effectiveness of Cultural Audits

Cultural audits are frequently recommended as diagnostic tools for assessing the state of organisational culture and DEI initiatives (Nishii, 2013). Future studies should evaluate the outcomes of cultural audits in practice, focusing on their role in shaping policies and fostering continuous improvement. Such research would help organisations better understand the tangible benefits and limitations of cultural audits, allowing for more strategic and evidence-based implementation.

By addressing these identified gaps, future research will contribute to a more holistic understanding of how organisational culture influences women's perceptions of DEI initiatives within the manufacturing sector. This knowledge is essential for crafting evidence-based strategies that foster genuine inclusivity, mitigate gender-related turnover, and support women's long-term career success.

7.6 Conclusion

This study underscores the persistent disconnect between formal DEI policies and the lived realities of women managers in manufacturing (Bourne et al., 2019). While organisations have made strides in promoting gender diversity, systemic barriers embedded within organisational culture continue to undermine these efforts (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021). The findings highlight the necessity of shifting from performative DEI initiatives to transformative cultural change strategies that prioritise leadership accountability, mentorship, and inclusive workplace norms. Achieving gender equity in manufacturing leadership is not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity

for industry sustainability. By addressing deeply ingrained cultural norms and fostering an environment of genuine inclusivity, organisations can unlock the full potential of diverse leadership teams, driving innovation, employee engagement, and long-term success.

Furthermore, the researcher posits that the responsibility of organisations extends beyond internal workplace dynamics. As key societal institutions, businesses do not operate in isolation from the broader cultural context, rather, they are active participants in shaping and evolving societal norms (Downey et al., 2020). The study finds that while they may not be directly accountable for entrenched hegemonic value systems, organisations bear a degree of responsibility in challenging and dismantling structural inequities that perpetuate gender disparities. As Lieutenant General David Morrison famously stated, *"The standard you walk past, is the standard you accept."* This study, therefore, argues that responsible organisations must actively contribute to societal transformation by embedding gender equity into their leadership paradigms and operational frameworks. By addressing deeply ingrained cultural norms and fostering an environment of genuine inclusivity, organisations can unlock the full potential of diverse leadership teams.

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9. Appendix A – Interview Guide

Perception of Organisational Culture

1. Can you describe the overall culture of your organisation? How would you characterize the work environment, and the values promoted within the organisation?
2. How do you feel your personal values align with the organisational culture? Can you provide examples where you felt a strong alignment or misalignment?
3. In your opinion, what aspects of the organisational culture support or hinder the advancement of women into leadership roles?

Gender Diversity Efforts (Artifacts)

4. What practices or policies has your organisation implemented to promote gender diversity? How effective do you think these measures have been?
5. How visible are gender diversity initiatives in your workplace? Can you give examples of any symbols, awards, or events that signify a commitment to diversity?
6. How do the organisational structure and existing policies impact women's opportunities for advancement? Are there specific barriers or facilitators you have encountered?

Perceptions of Practices and Policies

7. Can you discuss any specific programs or initiatives aimed at supporting women in leadership roles? How have these initiatives influenced your career development?
8. How do you think the organisation’s formal policies (e.g., maternity leave, flexible working hours) affect the career progression of women?

Decision to Leave or Stay

9. Can you share your experiences regarding any thoughts or decisions to leave the organisation? What factors influenced your decision to stay or consider leaving?
10. In what ways do you think gender diversity and inclusivity efforts within the organisation can be improved to affect turnover intentions among female employees in managerial roles?

Barriers and Challenges

11. What specific challenges have you faced as a woman in a managerial role within the manufacturing sector? How have these challenges affected your career?
12. Are there any unwritten cultural norms or practices that you believe hinder the advancement of women in your organisation? Can you describe these norms?

General

Do you have any other comments regarding your organisational culture and its influence on the gender diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in your organisation?

10. Appendix B - Code List

Research Question Number	Code Description
RQ1	**RQ1: Women Managers Experience Organisational Culture**
RQ1	Differences between males and females in organisational culture
RQ1	Exclusion of Women
RQ1	Expectations for Women to Match
RQ1	Perceived Societal and Cultural Norms
RQ1	Perception of Organisational Culture
RQ1	Personal Values vs Organisational Values
RQ1	societal expectations on women
RQ1	Types of culture that exist in organisations
RQ1	Women defining Organisational Culture
RQ2	**RQ2: Women's Perceptions of Effectiveness of DEI Initiatives**
RQ2	Male Gender Bias and undermining
RQ2	Trust from Leadership
RQ2	Women's perceptions of barriers
RQ2	Women have to be "strong"
RQ2	Bad Policies
RQ2	Communication of policy
RQ2	Compliance based diversity
RQ2	DEI initiatives comments from men
RQ2	Effective DEI policies
RQ2	Female to Female DEI Bias
RQ2	Gender Biases and microaggressions
RQ2	Lack of visibility for companies' DEI Initiatives
RQ2	Leaders driving women progression
RQ2	measurement of DEI Success
RQ2	Narratives created in the workplace
RQ2	No funds for change
RQ2	No Gender DEI policies
RQ2	No implementors of Policy
RQ2	Perceptions of Policies
RQ2	Regulations driving policy change
RQ2	suggested policies
RQ2	Training for Diversity
RQ2	victimisation of women
RQ2	window dressing
RQ3	**RQ3: Women's Perceptions of Inclusivity Influence on Retention**
RQ3	Staying' or 'Leaving' the industry
RQ3	Accommodating Women in the workplace

RQ3	care economy
RQ3	culture of sexual harassment
RQ3	Difficulties women face in the workplace
RQ3	Drivers of lack of progress for women
RQ3	flexible work conditions
RQ3	Frustrations for women managers
RQ3	How to address some challenges
RQ3	lack of female representation
RQ3	Lack of work flexibility
RQ3	lack or retention
RQ3	leadership types
RQ3	Limited growth Opportunities
RQ3	Mentorship and Training
RQ3	Motivations for succeeding
RQ3	No career path planned for women
RQ3	No support for women
RQ3	Not accommodating women in the workplace
RQ3	Pioneering women
RQ3	Planning for Future Career
RQ3	psychological safety in the workplace
RQ3	Reason for Choosing Manufacturing
RQ3	Reason for Staying in manufacturing
RQ3	Representation in the workplace
RQ3	resilience in manufacturing
RQ3	The drive for women early in their careers
RQ3	Women Recognition
RQ3	Women roles in the workplace
RQ3	Women Struggle for credibility
RQ3	work life balance