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Examining barriers to career advancement for black women in the Information and Communication Technology sector in South Africa

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Examining barriers to career advancement for black women in the Information and Communication Technology sector in South Africa

Mpho Lekeba

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration

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ABSTRACT

This research project examines the persistent barriers encountered by black women in the workplace, emphasizing the overlapping racial and gender biases that contribute to this inequality. These dual experiences intersect, resulting in distinct forms of discrimination that cannot be fully understood independently.

A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the experiences of 16 Black women currently employed in the Information and Communications Technology sector in South Africa

The findings reveal persistent stereotypes of black women, there are barriers to mentorship, unequal compensation despite performing similar roles as their colleagues and the struggle for work life balance. Many women expressed concerns that their race and gender were central factors in determining their promotions and career advancement opportunities.

The research also identifies action plans that can be incorporated for black women and ICT organisations to overcome these challenges. Despite these challenges, Black women should not be discouraged; rather, they should confront these obstacles head-on in pursuit of their careers. Their resilience and determination can serve as powerful tools in navigating and overcoming the systemic barriers present in the workplace.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ICT Information and Communication Technology
IT Information Technology
STEM Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics
WEF World Economic Forum
WEGE Women Empowerment and Gender Equality

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of purpose

This research aimed to examine the barriers that impede black women's career progression in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector.

1.2 Background of the study

International

The World Economic Forum (WEF) (2023) reports on the state of gender parity within the international labour market, highlighting that women's participation has declined and economic opportunities remain unequal. Women face barriers in their career progression (Bambo, 2023). The worldwide presence of women in positions of power, encompassing Directors, Vice Presidents, and C-suite positions, had been gradually increasing from 31.1% in 2016 to 32.6% in 2022. However, this growth tapered off to 32.2% by early 2023.

Between 2016 and mid-2022, in industries such as Technology, Information and Media, despite these gains there was a decline in women's representation across seniority levels in early 2023, with a pronounced drop in senior leadership positions.

Challenges in advancing gender equality in Africa

Agenda 2063, developed by the African Union, is a visionary plan to promote gender equality, empower women, and uphold their rights. Despite its noble intentions, women continue to face obstacles in the implementation

and enforcement of this agenda due to a lack of engagement (African Union, 2015).

Within the context of Kenya, Kemboi and Sangura (2023) note the importance of institutionalising gender issues in development paradigms globally. While considerable advancements have been achieved in integrating “the Gender Equality and Women Empowerment” (GEWE) strategic foundations in Kenya’s development agenda, systemic and structural factors remain significant barriers (Kenya, Kemboi and Sangura, 2023).

It is essential to remove these obstacles and strive for a future in which women have equal opportunities and rights and this requires advocating for the full realisation of Agenda 2063 and empowering women across Africa.

Black women’s underrepresentation in South Africa

Research indicates that women experience reduced levels of social and economic engagement as well as lower representation when compared to men (StatsSA, 2023). Statistics South Africa (2023) notes that in Quarter 4 2023, employed females in the economically active population (EAP) amounted to 7,4 million (44%) in South Africa, 76% of which are black. Even though black women comprise 38% of the EAP in South Africa, they remain insufficiently represented in decision-making positions and roles of influence (StatsSA, 2023; Bell & Nkomo, 2021; Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021; Nqumba & Scheepers, 2023).

The reasons for this are rooted deeply in societal, economic, and ethical imperatives. By identifying and mitigating these, this research contributes to developing a more equitable and inclusive labour market, where individuals are afforded equal opportunities for professional advancement irrespective of gender.

1.3 Research problem

The fastest-growing industry in the twenty-first century is ICT which is a broad term for information technology. It is one of the main economic sectors in most countries, promoting growth and wealth for both individuals and the economy Kunda, Jordaan and Mennega (2022) as noted by Broughel and Thierer (2019).

Similarly Welfens (2008) refers to ICT as a diverse and dynamic industry, encompassing a range of technology-intensive and knowledge-intensive activities. The South Africa ICT market is segmented and the key players in the market are organisations like IBM Corporation, Vodacom, Microsoft, and Telkom SA Soc Limited (Turban et al., 2019; Amor et al., 2019; Bambo, 2023; and Mordor Intelligence, 2023).

The gender imbalance in the labour market is prevalent in 2024 and requires an in-depth look at the causes and challenges faced by women, the underrepresented group (Birkner, 2019; Mhuru, 2023). Fluchtmann and Patrini (2023) observe that women tend to feel pessimistic about joining technology companies and that their gender holds them back. Although advancement regarding gender equality is gradually improving within the work place, disparities persist in terms of representation, pay equity, and leadership opportunities (Kelly & Fries-Brit, 2022; Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

By investigating these issues and examining how gender dynamics influence career progression of black women, this study aims to illuminate the specific barriers and opportunities for strengthening gender equity. The findings will not only contribute to academic knowledge but also guide practical strategies (Ndweni & Ozumba, 2021).

1.4 Research objectives and research questions

Research objectives

The research objectives are to investigate barriers experienced by black women in ICT in South Africa.

Research question

The following question is central to the objective of the research:

> What are the barriers to career advancement faced by black women in the Information and Communication Technology sector in South Africa?

Proposition:

> Black women encounter systemic discrimination and bias in hiring, promotion, and leadership opportunities within the ICT industry, which negatively impact their career progression. Furthermore, these barriers are influenced by both racial and gender stereotypes, organisational culture, and societal norms, leading to disparities in career outcomes as compared to their male and non-black counterparts.

1.5 Rationale

ICT industries often maintain cultures that are unwelcoming to women, characterised by discrimination, harassment, and unequal treatment. These hidden discriminatory work environments perpetuate gender disparities by creating barriers to entry and retention for women (Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2023). Discriminatory practices, such as bias in hiring and promotion decisions or unequal pay, reinforce the marginalisation of black women in these industries and deter them from pursuing or remaining in these industries (Ndweni & Ozumba, 2021).

Industries with demanding schedules or inflexible work structures pose significant challenges for women, particularly those balancing caregiving responsibilities or seeking work-life balance (Carreri, Dordoni, & Poggio, 2022). The lack of a supportive environment, such as paid parental leave or flexible work options intensify these challenges, making it hard for women to sustain long-term careers in male-dominated industries without sacrificing their personal or family obligations (Moorthy et al., 2022).

Research is necessary to support advocacy for gender-neutral workplaces, encourage diverse viewpoints, experiences, and methods of problem-solving and decision-making, and boost employee satisfaction and morale when employees feel valued.

1.6 Delimitations of the study

This study focused on employees based in South Africa, where the insufficient women in the ICT industry is notably pronounced as well as being a challenge globally. There is no specific company to mention, which implies that the challenges highlighted will only come from the ICT industry rather than other industries which may have similar challenges. The focus was on middle management participants.

While there may be changes over time, this research only focuses on a specific timeframe, namely black women's career progression without necessarily considering the other women who may face similar challenges within the same background. It must be noted that some women are comfortable in their roles and may not desire upward mobility. Others may prefer to make lateral moves within the organisation, while some women may have already achieved their maximum potential. This research used qualitative interviews, and the sample comprised of convenience sampling rather than random sampling.

1.7 Definition of terms

The following are, *inter alia*, amongst the main terms used in the study.

- Black women: women who identify as black or of African descent. Black women originate from a variety of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, each having distinct experiences influenced by race, gender, and class.
- Gender equality: this refers to the root causes of bias that is recognised in order to guarantee that all individuals, regardless of gender, possess equal access to professional opportunities.
- Gender: this refers to the social and cultural distinctions between males and females, rather than the biological dissimilarities.
- Intersectionality: this is a framework that explores how various aspects of a persons identity such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and ability interact to shape their experience. It emphasizes that these overlapping identities must be considered when analysing social inequities.

1.8 Assumptions

Assumptions include that there are gender disparities, and women are insufficiently represented in leadership roles within the ICT sector. Women face different challenges to those experienced by their male counterparts, challenges such as gender and race stereotypes, limited access to mentorship, unequal opportunity advancement, and discrimination. The participants had encountered structural barriers that prohibited them from progressing in their careers and thus undermine the ability of women to achieve professional success. The assumption is that if organisations focus on increasing the representation of women they can expect better outcomes as different perspectives will be considered.

1.9 Chapter outline

Chapter one presents the concepts that the research engaged in, which are barriers for career advancement for black women in ICT and outlines key summary statistics.

Chapter two covers literature that discusses the obstacles that the woman are confronted with. The intersectionally literature answers the research question regarding barriers faced by black women during the development of their careers.

The research methodology is discussed in chapter three, which is qualitative research methodology.The detail in the sample and justification is provided. Finally the chapter addresses quality assurance measures, ethical considerations.

Chapter four outlines the outcomes, highlighting the key themes that surfaced and illuminating the voices of the sixteen participants.

The interpretation and an overview of the results are presented in chapter five. These are examined in detail, discussing their implications in the context of the research questions. This includes exploring how the results align with, or contradict existing literature.

Chapter six presents the recommendations aimed at empowering black women in their professional journeys, as well as strategies for organisations to promote a more inclusive workplace. It also includes the conclusion of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the existing research on the underrepresentation of women, particularly black women, in the field of ICT, and the intersectionality of race and gender.

This section starts by analysing the present circumstances of black women within the ICT sector, emphasizing their underrepresentation and the barriers they encounter in advancing their careers. The discussion subsequently explores relevant management theories, particularly focusing on the “intersectionality of race and gender”, in order to understand the dynamics influencing the experiences of black women in the workplace. A comprehensive review of existing literature will investigate the intesectionality, stereotypes, mentorship, pay inequalities, and work-life balance. Ultimately, this discussion aims to shed light on the intricate challenges faced by black women.

Black women in ICT

Black women continue to be inadequately represented in the ICT sectors globally (Chaudhry, Wall & Wall, 2019). Several factors influence women’s in the ICT industry include professional opportunities, personal passions, family influences, and entreprenueral interests (Kuschel, Ettl, Díaz-García, & Alsos, 2020 and Kunda, Jordaan, & Mennega, 2022). The ICT sector has a key role in the South Africa’s economy, as it is an enabler that can encourage economic growth and enhance gender inclusivity within this sector (Munyeka, 2022).

Women in the South African ICT industry face numerous obstacles that limit their ability to advance in their careers and remain in the field (Munyeka & Maharaj, 2022). These obstacles encompass inequitable pay practices, imbalanced work-life dynamics, a harmful company culture, insufficient representation, and unequal opportunities for advancement (Kunda et al., 2022).

The absence of female mentors, inadequate recognition, and lack of early exposure to technology further exacerbate the situation (Barkhuizen, Masakane & van der Sluis, 2022). The low retention rate of women in the IT sector in South Africa not only affects gender parity but also risks the failure of technological developments to address the needs of women (Chaudhry et al., 2019). Research indicates that globally, women in IT face similar challenges leading to high attrition rates, emphasising the urgency to address these issues.

While acknowledging improvements in women's status, including legislative changes and increased opportunities, it is imperative to critically assess whether women are effectively advancing in their professional trajectories.

This literature review explores barriers that black women experience in the ICT sector in South Africa. To understand these barriers, this literature review looks at intersectionality, specifically how racial and gender barriers affect black women's career progression in ICT.

2.2 Management theories: Intersectionality of race and gender

Crenshaw's Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that has been chosen for this research and is referred to as "how various social identities, such as those based on race, gender, sexual orientation and class intersect and work together to create individual experiences of privilege and discrimination" (Brahm, 2019 and Foster, 2021). It makes the case that

people are inextricably linked to a multitude of identities and that these identities interact to create intricate experiences of inequality (Netto, Noon, Hudson, Kamenou-Aigbekaen, & Sosenko, 2020).

This research seeks to highlight the experiences of black women in ICT. Extensive studies have been conducted in order to comprehend the challenges faced by black women in ICT in South Africa (Taylor, 2024). Intersectionality highlights that individuals do not experience oppression based solely on a single characteristic, but rather through the combination of multiple identities. In this instance the two specific barriers that this literature review focuses on are gender and race.

2.2.1 Race and gender as an intersection

Race is a social construct that classifies individuals based on perceived physical characteristics, such as skin color, hair texture, facial features, and other visible traits (Gradin, 2021). Throughout history, racial categories have been used to justify discrimination, inequality, and oppression, as well as to establish hierarchies of power and privilege (Bergmann, 1974; Bell & Nkomo, 2022).

Overall, race is a concept deeply intertwined with social perceptions, power dynamics, and historical contexts, and its meaning and significance can vary. Apartheid policies, for example, were explicitly based on racial classifications, which entrenched systemic discrimination and inequality among different racial groups (Gradin, 2021; Roche & Passmore, 2023).

By recognising race as a social construct, racial categories were used to justify unequal access to resources and opportunities, perpetuating structural racism within the labour market. Racial inequalities persist in post-apartheid South Africa, despite the end of apartheid legislation. By understanding race as a socially constructed concept, the research can better analyse the ongoing challenges experienced by black women.

Gender pertains to the social, cultural, and behavioural traits, expectations, and roles that societies consider appropriate for men and women (Nupen & Jagernath 2022; Mentusova, 2023). Research in South Africa highlights the obstacles that black women face in the workplace that impede their career progress, and the degree to which these obstacles are shaped by their gender (Kenny, Donnelly & Etlyn, 2019; Krishnan, Biggerstaff, Szczepura, Dolton, Livingston, Hattersley & Raymond, 2019).

Smith, Bell and Nkomo (2022) and Disterer (2022) discuss experiences of women within the workforce and state that even though women may have had similar educational backgrounds and work experience, black women faced significant barriers in progressing to leadership positions in relation to their white peers. Despite the increasing number of South African women with higher education degrees, their career advancement in the workplace remains challenging (Dosunmu, 2019; Klinger et al., 2021).

Some of the cited reasons are due to lack of sponsors, experiences of racism and a struggle for visibility. Additionally, gender equality expands the talent pool, addressing skill shortages and driving economic growth, as highlighted by the World Bank (2019). Diverse perspectives promoted by gender diversity improve innovation and problem-solving, as highlighted by Makhutla, Naidoo & Rugbeer (2021) and Ohei (2023). This is particularly evident in the ICT industry, where barriers such as lack of training, mentoring, support, and networking remain common (Ndweni, 2021).

2.2.2 Stereotypes of being a black woman

The stereotypes associated with being a black woman are rooted in deep-seated societal norms that discourage or deter women from pursuing careers in certain industries (Ridgeway, Korn & Williams, 2022). Stereotype of a black woman is an oversimplified and negative generalisation such as being seen as angry, overly strong, that disregards her individuality and

complexity, and is rooted in historical and cultural biases that distort her experiences and identity (Motro, 2022).

Nupen and Jagernath (2022) suggest that men are more confident in themselves than women and this is one of the factors explaining why more women apply exclusively for highly qualified professions, while males are more inclined to apply for positions for which they are sometimes qualified and sometimes not (Ghazi, 2022). This helps to explain why men are given preference over women when applying for managerial roles.

Black women's experiences are deeply shaped by the intersection of their racial and gender identities, creating challenges that cannot be understood by simply examining these aspects separately (Taylor, 2024). As Crenshaw (2013) argues, the discrimination they face is not limited to traditional concepts of race or gender; instead, it emerges from the unique interplay of racism and sexism in their lives. This compounded discrimination results in specific inequalities, particularly in the workplace, emphasizing the necessity for a comprehensive understanding and advocacy that simultaneously tackles both aspects.

2.2.3 Mentorship for black women

Black women frequently face limited access to mentors, sponsors, and networks due to the underrepresentation in leadership positions, a situation exacerbated by systemic barriers such as racial and gender biases that result in diminished opportunities for advancement. While white women tend to have an advantage in this regard, due to their access to white mentors who can better understand their challenges and experiences, black women often struggle to find mentors who can relate to their unique experiences (Nkomo et al., 2019).

The cultural differences between black women and their white counterparts can pose challenges in forming a meaningful mentor-mentee relationship.

Black women may experience further isolation due to the patriarchal norms within the black community that are often followed by black men (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). It is essential to acknowledge the challenges faced by black women and to strive for greater opportunities for mentorship and support. By connecting black women with mentors who understand their unique experiences and obstacles, we can help overcome these barriers and promote greater diversity and inclusion in leadership roles (Rabelo et al., 2020).

There are challenges for black women regarding networking opportunities, which enable them to connect with industry professionals, access new opportunities, and build collaborative relationships that encourage career growth.Their male counterparts create “boys’ clubs” where teams form in-group and out-group divisions, which may lead to unjust treatment of their female coworkers through unequal pay or fewer possibilities for advancement (Larasatie et al., 2019). Senior female mentors in particular play a key role in promoting cultures that support equal opportunity and counter unfair discrimination (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Lastly, professional development opportunities, such as training programmes and conferences, offer avenues for skill enhancement, learning, and career progression (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021).

2.2.4 Pay disparities for black women

Pay disparity describes the difference in salaries earned by men and women and almost every country and business in the world has lower average salaries for women than for men (Susanthi et al., 2023). The gender pay gap in the ICT industry is a persistent and concerning issue that reflects broader systemic inequalities (Bambo, 2023). Research consistently demonstrates that women in the ICT sector experience significant disparities in pay and work environment in relation to their male peers (Quan, 2020; Griffin, 2020; Segovia-Pérez, 2020).

These disparities are not merely a reflection of individual choices or qualifications but are deeply rooted in gendered structures and organisational practices that undervalue women's contributions (Bosch & Tijdens, 2019). As of 2024, statistics from StatsSA indicate that pay disparities for black South African women remain a significant issue. The data reveals that, on average, Black women earn considerably less than their male counterparts and women from other racial groups (Bambo, 2023 and StatsSA, 2024)

Additionally, the wage gap is more pronounced in highly skilled and ICT-intensive roles, reflecting a broader trend of gender inequality in industries that are considered high-tech and male-dominated (World Economic Forum, 2022). Taniguchi (2020) highlights that the wage gap between skilled and unskilled workers has been increasing in some countries, further widening the disparities (Makhutla et al., 2021). These findings underscore the necessity for thorough strategies to tackle gender inequalities in the ICT sector, which encompass advocating for pay transparency, establishing fair wage-setting practices, and confronting gender stereotypes and biases that sustain inequality.

The gender pay gap in the ICT industry is a multifaceted issue influenced by organisational practices, sectoral characteristics, and broader societal norms. Some organisations have introduced a gender pay assessment to identify and tackle salary disparities between the genders (Ballaro et al., 2023 and Bambo, 2023).

The pay disparity between black women and their white counterparts is a critical issue highlighted in the research (Adeleken & Bussin, 2022). In the ICT sector, black women consistently earn less than both white women and black men in equivalent roles, further exacerbating the challenges they encounter in terms of career advancement (Smith & Nkomo, 2021). This inequity not only impacts their financial stability but also contributes to a lack

of representation in leadership positions, perpetuating a cycle of inequality. Addressing such disparities is essential for creating a more inclusive and equitable workplace, where black women are able to thrive and realize their full potential (Powell, 2019)**.**

2.2.5 Work – life balance

Work-life balance is a critical issue in contemporary workplaces, particularly affecting women's career trajectories. Women have a unique set of challenges related to work-life balance as a consequence of societal expectations and organisational cultures that perpetuate gender norms (Munyeka et al., 2022). Women have to prioritise family responsibilities which conflict with their professional commitment, leading to stigmatisation and concerns about performance (Etlyn et al., 2019). Women may be perceived as less competent and this limits a women's career advancement (Bala et al.,2022).

Furthermore, studies show that women are more inclined than their male peers to access and use supportive work policies, including flexible work arrangements hours or taking maternity leave (Cromwell, 2023). This differential utilisation can further create a perception that black women are less committed to their careers when compared to men.

In summary, the stigmatisation of work-life balance practices, particularly among women, reflects deeply ingrained gender norms and organisational cultures that equate professional commitment with rigid work schedules (Bavitha, 2021). Addressing this issue requires a shift in organisational culture, regardless of gender. Only then can true work-life balance be achieved, benefiting not only women but also promoting a more inclusive and equitable workplace for all.

2.3 Research Question

The primary question that the research intended to examine and address was the following:

> What are the barriers to career advancement faced by black women in the Information and Communication Technology sector?

2.4 Analytical Framework

In understanding the complexities surrounding women's career advancement in the ICT sector in South Africa, it is important to adopt a comprehensive analytical framework that demonstrates the relationship and understanding of the complexities career advancement amongst women.

The analytical framework will interpret the multifaceted barriers hindering the progress of women in the workplace and the broader implications thereof for gender equality initiatives by synthesising theoretical insights from the intersectionality framework alongside empirical findings on gender discrimination. This framework offers a comprehensive perspective on the challenges women encounter while advancing their careers. Moreover, by exploring methodological approaches and policy implications, this framework offers actionable insights for addressing gender disparities and fostering inclusive work environments.

2.4.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework chosen for this study is the intersectionality of race and gender for black women, which aims to understand and explain ways in which women experience compounded levels of disadvantage. The theoretical framework for examining the intersectionality of race and gender offers a systematic framework for understanding and analyzing the complexities of this topic. Drawing from established theories in the literature that have been validated by previous research, such as intersectionality

theory and feminist theories, the theoretical framework offers a systematic account of the relationships between race, gender, and other variables.

By synthesising discipline-based literature relating regarding the interplay of race and gender, researchers can identify an overarching theory that informs their central proposition. Importantly, the theoretical framework serves as a foundation for the study, providing structure, context, and focus to the research process.

2.4.2 Conceptual Framework

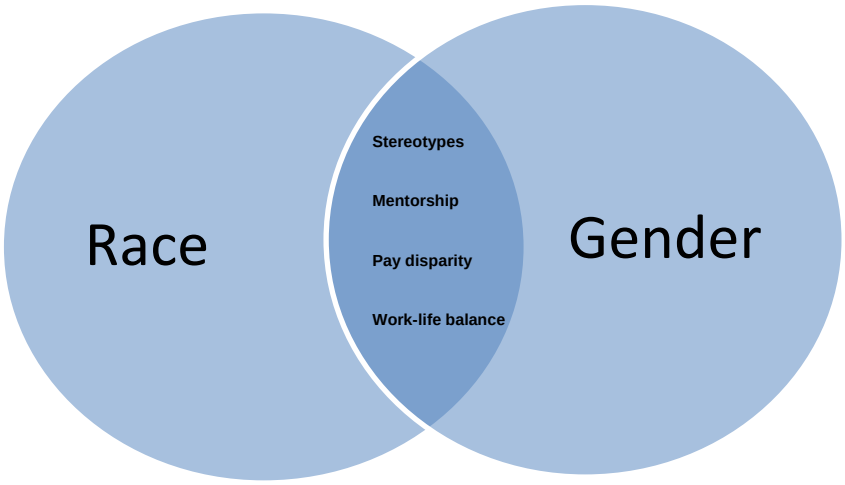

Figure 1: The intersectionality of race and gender

The expected outcomes were the awareness and comprehension of the role of gender-role stereotyping and organisational culture in shaping women's career advancement. By identifying and addressing these variables, organisations can develop interventions and strategies to encourage gender equality, diversity, inclusion, and facilitate career progression, underpinned by intersectionalities of race and gender**.**

2.5 Conclusion of Literature Review

The intersectionality of race and gender significantly impacts on the experience of black women in ICT. This is posited to give rise to interconnected and mutually dependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage (Bell & Nkomo, 2022 and Foster, 2021).

Black women's challenges are generally gender and race based. Together the two experiences are compounded, contributing to a gap in the participation of black women in the ICT sector (Kunda et al., 2022). Organisations need to introduce measures to support women, since, if this

is not addressed, there is a risk of reinforcing the prevailing male-dominated culture (Musungwini, Zhou & Musungwini, 2020 and Klaasen & Minasyan, 2021).

Rabelo et al. (2020) highlights the deep-rooted racial and gender biases that exist in the workplace. Black women encounter contradictory challenges at work, such as being simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible. Black women may be perceived as being hostile even when they display the same behaviour as white people, suggesting some degree of racial bias.

Black women often tend to assume additional responsibilities in the workplace, seeking to have their efforts acknowledged. However, this is not always acknowledged and additional compensation or recognition is not automatic. Women may also be overlooked for promotions when an opportunity is presented, and according to Kenny (2020) and Klasen and Minayam (2021) this may to some extent be a consequence of racial or gender bias.

In summary, research suggests that there are challenges impeding career progression amongst black women within South Africa's ICT sector. Even though advancements in legislative frameworks and societal perceptions towards gender equality have been enacted, deeply entrenched gender-role stereotyping persists. Black women still struggle to overcome the glass ceiling. The corporate landscape remains predominantly male-dominated, often perpetuating "boys' clubs" that marginalise and exclude their female counterparts. Black women find themselves excluded from decision-making processes and leadership opportunities.

These challenges are not unique to South Africa; black women encounter these challenges globally as well. Across different countries and industries, women often confront similar barriers to career progression, with limited

support structures in place to address gender disparities and encourage an inclusive environment.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research sought to investigate the obstacles that black women in the ICT sector in South Africa may face. The selected methodology was a qualitative research approach, which proved to be effective and practical for understanding the research topic (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). The design of the instrument, the data collection procedures, and the methods of data analysis are explained in detail below.

3.1 Research approach

The semi-structured interviews were conducted, and information gathered to unpack and describe critical factors operating in an identified situation (Aurini et al., 2021 and Hennink et al., 2020). The data was analysed, allowing for the completion of the set-out task, which involved describing the events, identifying the specific problem or answering the research question (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019 and Santosh et al., 2023).

3.2 Research design

The overall design adopted was that of phenomenology, which seeks to understand subjective experiences and the meanings they place on their experiences (Morujão, 2023). The advantages are that interviews are conducted in a real-world context. When conducting research, asking open-ended questions can lead to the discovery of new problems or opportunities that may not have been considered otherwise, allowing the research to identify additional information and context (Hennink et al., 2020). The sample size was small which could be viewed as a limitation of the research since it did not represent the larger group (Bougie & Sekaran ,2019).

3.3 Data collection methods

Interviews with the participants employed in the ICT industry were conducted to explore their career progression experiences and the barriers experienced. Interviews provided a picture of what the individual experienced (Hennink et al., 2020). Understanding their barriers and perceptions allowed the interviewer to obtain the nuances of the participants career trajectories and perspectives (Iida, 2023).

3.4 Population and sample

The population denotes the complete set of individuals or items that a researcher aims to study (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). Sampling, on the other hand, entailed selecting a subset of the population (Braun et al., 2019). The next section describes population and sample selected.

3.4.1 Population

Bougie and Sekaran (2019) defined a population as a group of people, things, or events a researcher is interested in investigating. The population identified for this research consisted of black women who are currently employed in the ICT industry in South Africa. Individuals from various ICT companies were interviewed. By targeting this population, the aim was to understand the intersectional experiences of race and gender, the factors contributing to their underrepresentation, and insights from across the ICT sector were captured (Iida, 2023 and Foster, 2021).

3.4.2 Sample and sampling method

A sample of women was selected from middle management within ICT. The selected sample allowed for the research objectives to be met. Choosing a specific sample ensured that the participants with relevant experience and insights took part. This facilitated the collection of relevant information. It

was assumed that because the participants are in ICT they were able to provide their first-hand experiences and make meaningful contributions to this research.

Sixteen females in ICT was the desired sample size. A formal invitation was sent out to the participants well in advance to allow them time to avail themselves for the interview. A small sample size was selected, enabling a comprehensive investigation and analysis of experiences and viewpoints and saturation point was reached (Marshal et al., 2011; Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). Seven questions, with sub-questions provided a comprehensive understanding of the themes.

Table 1: Profile of respondents (by position)

Positions of respondents	Number to be sampled
Middle Management (divided this into various roles):	Total: 16
• Business analysts	2
• IT Consultants	5
• IT Project Managers	4
• Software Developer	3
• Solutions Engineer	2

3.5 The research instrument

The research question below informed the overall study:

> What are the barriers to career advancement faced by black women in the Information and Communication Technology sector?

The research instrument selected for this research was a semi-structured interview schedule tailored to capture qualitative insights into barriers experienced by black women in South Africa's ICT sector. This instrument began with an introduction to the research, followed by demographic

questions to contextualise participant responses. The profile of the selected participants, as well as their age range, occupation, and years of experience were obtained.

The subsequent questions examined intersectionality of race and gender, mentorship and networking opportunities (Iida, 2023). All these factors contributed to women's career advancement, aligning closely with the research questions and theoretical framework. The instrument allowed for open-ended responses, encouraging comprehensive exploration of participants' perspectives and barriers, thereby ensuring that every voice was heard and valued (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019).

3.6 Procedure for data collection

Emails introducing the research were sent to the identified participants. The agreement to use the data for this study was included in the email, and it was reaffirmed during the interviews. The interviews took place at a convenient time for the participants and the duration was about 30 to 45 minutes. The settings in which the interviews took place were agreed on by the participants, which was online recording communication tools. The interviews were recorded.

3.7 Data analysis strategies and interpretation

The data analysis strategy employed was the qualitative content analysis approach, which examined data obtained from the semi-structured interviews (Braun et al., 2019). This method allowed participants to share a story regarding their lived experiences, and enabled a comprehensive and nuanced narrative of their experiences and perspectives, especially effective for investigating intricate issues such as gender dynamics in the workplace (Braun et al., 2019 and Sharp, 2024).

The research instrument covered different themes so that the participants can answer questions. The procedure started with familiarising the data by transcribing and reviewing the interview responses. After this, preliminary codes were created to identify interesting features (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). The codes were then compiled into possible themes, and a reiterative process allowed for validation and improvement.

3.8 Possible limitations and challenges of the study

When conducting qualitative research, data analysis can inadvertently introduce bias into interpreting the results. In the case of this particular study, limitations were taken into account. Firstly, the study was conducted solely with black women in ICT, and was challenging to draw broad conclusions about this topic in South Africa because of the country's complexity and diversity. Secondly, the total count of participants engaged in the study was relatively low and restricted to a specific industry, which may impact on the accuracy of the results. Lastly, the study only included black women and needed to incorporate the perspectives of male counterparts and other key stakeholders, which could have resulted in a limited viewpoint.

3.9 Quality Assurance

Transferability, credibility and dependability are discussed in the next section.

3.9.1 Transferability

This research focused on a small sample. The participants were from Gauteng, South Africa, and the research focused on the dynamics of that country; women from other countries may have had different experiences. To ensure a comprehensive understanding, this research included women from diverse background in terms of number of years working in their role

and in middle management (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). Findings were compared with existing intersectionality literature on gender issues in ICT, commonalities and differences were identified. This approach allowed for future studies to replicate and expand on the research in different contexts, and for women to benefit from the recommendations derived from this research (Aurini et al., 2021).

3.9.2 Credibility

This research may have had limitations regarding its credibility. For example, women may have provided responses that they perceived as socially acceptable. The women could have had recall bias, and the research assumptions could have clouded and influenced the data collected and analysed. For maximum credibility, semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share the barriers and perspectives in detail (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). These interviews were recorded and participants were assured that the responses received would only be used for this study. The research maintained an audit trail, including records of data collected, which ensured transparency and credibility.

3.9.3 Dependability

This research may have had limitations regarding dependability as the collected data of women in the ICT sector in South Africa's perspectives and experiences may have led to researcher bias and inconsistencies (Braun et al., 2019 and Kunda et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews may have led to variations in data quality and consistency. Therefore, coding was employed, data analysis procedures that are systemic and transparent were used, and a detailed interview protocol was used (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019).

3.10 Ethical considerations

To guarantee that the study was undertaken responsibly and respectfully, ethical considerations were thoroughly addressed. Informed consent was

crucial, as these participants were made aware of the research objective and their rights and provided voluntary consent before they could participate (Hunn, 2020). The participants were informed of their confidentiality and anonymity to protect their privacy, and the responses were stored securely to prevent unauthorised access.

The data was only used for this research. The research was driven by a commitment to fully understand women's perspectives. It was designed to avoid causing harm or discomfort and to respect their rights, including that participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any point (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019 and Taylor, 2024). A key aspect of this commitment was cultural sensitivity (Sharp, 2024). The research was acutely aware of the cultural and societal environments, ensuring that the participants unique experiences are respected and understood (Hunn, 2020).

Bias was rigorously avoided, and the findings were not influenced by personal assumptions or beliefs. Transparency was necessary, and the methodology and findings were reported clearly. Collaboration with participants ensured meaningful and relevant findings (Hunn, 2020). Finally, ethical approval was secured from the ethics committee before the research began.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outline the findings of a qualitative study that explored the experiences of 16 black women in the ICT sector. Through semi-structured interviews, the study aimed to examine the unique challenges black women face at the intersection of being black and female in a male-dominated and relatively racially homogenous industry. Section 4.2 provides an overview of the participant demographic characteristics, setting the context for the findings; section 4.3 focuses on the data interview results; and section 4.4 summarises the chapter.

4.2 Demographic information and sample characteristics

The sample of respondents comprised South African black females within the ICT sector, aiming to examine the barriers hindering their career progression. The research seeks to develop recommendations for improving gender diversity and supporting the progress of black women in ICT, with strategies aimed at increasing their representation and promoting inclusive practices that facilitate their career growth.

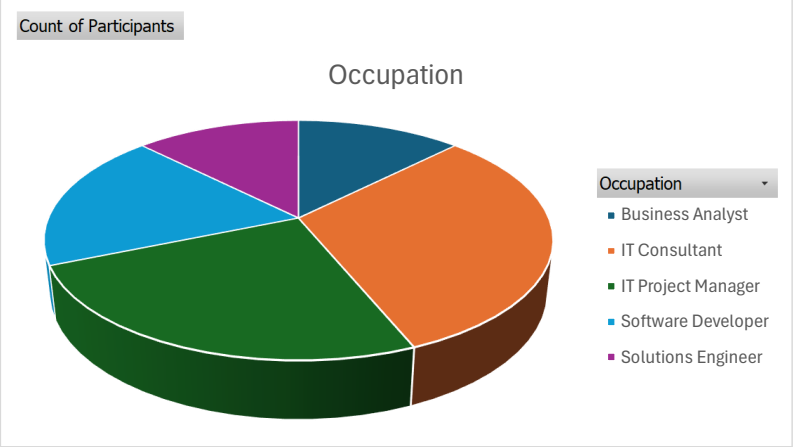

Figure 2: Chart 1: Sample Occupations

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

Count of Participants			
Age Group	**Qualification Type**	**Level of Education**	**Total**
25-35	**Business**	Bachelors	3
	Technical IT	Bachelors	3
		Diploma	2
36-45	**Business**	Masters	3
	Technical IT	Bachelors	5
Grand Total			**16**

Figure 2: Chart 1 and Table 2 presents the characteristics of the sample. The respondents are all black females, aged between 25 and 45 and currently navigating their careers. Of these, 50% were between the ages of 25 to 35 and the other 50% were between 36 to 45 years. About 60% have technical IT qualifications and are in specialist roles, 3 hold Masters qualifications and other participants possess general or business qualifications.

4.3 Interview Results

A complex interplay of racial and gender stereotypes, organisational culture, and broader societal norms shapes the barriers identified in this research.

Consequently, black women experience significant disparities in career advancement.

The interview findings are organised around key themes, that is intersectionality, stereotype of being a black woman, pay disparities for black women, work-life balance, and mentorship. Each theme includes a brief overview, accompanied by quotations and examples from the interview data to improve understanding of the participants' lived experiences. These themes highlight the key issues and insights from the study, offering an in-depth analysis of the factors that affect the experiences of black women in the ICT sector. Table 3 below presents the themes, main findings and excerpts from the interviews.

Table 3: Themes, Key findings and Excerpts

Themes	Key findings	Excerpts from interviews
Intersectionality	Lack of clear role definition	*"The role wasn't defined, clearly. And so I really had to just figure out what I should do".*
	Homogenous work environments	*"I still think that the gender disparities like you ask how many people like the demographics in my team looking at a team of eight and having one female that just shows that that there are barriers of entry for women".*
	Systemic barriers, including biases and discrimination, impacted their ability to thrive.	*"When I first joined the organisation, it was still in the early stages of transformation. The team was predominantly made up*

		of older white males, and I was one of the very few black women on the team…".
	Challenging environment for women to thrive, particularly in technical roles.	*"The IT industry is not designed for females, especially in technical roles… it feels like the guys get better opportunities".*
	Clear frustration regarding the inconsistencies in promotion processes.	*"I would be told... we're going to go through a probation process, while others did not go through it".*
	Cultural biases impacting opportunities	*"They tend to bring in other non black races... for major projects".*
Stereotypes of being a black woman	Recognition requires effort compared to counterparts	*"I often feel that no matter how hard I work, my contributions go unnoticed. I have to prove myself twice as much just to be seen".*
	Role pigeonholing	*"I made a conscious decision 10 years ago that I will never work in the public sector again because I can. I'm more than qualified..."*
	Support/caregiver role	*I can't say I've faced a lot of barriers because again, I was in roles that are, I guess, largely left for women"*

	Aggressive black woman	*"As you progress, you learn how to navigate them and you learn how to kinda stand up and have your own voice".*
Pay disparity for black women	Unequal compensation in the workplace	*"I've had situations where I found out that someone with less experience was getting paid more than me. It was discouraging, and I couldn't help but wonder…"*
	Lower pay while performing the same roles as their colleagues	*"I've had to constantly remind people of my achievements and even then, I'm not compensated fairly for the value I add. It's like they expect me to just accept less because I'm a black female".*
Work-life Balance	Single parent	*"As a single mom... the priority has always been my kid"*
	The burden of caregiving alongside their professional roles	*"… At work, I'm expected to excel, but at home, there are responsibilities that often come first".*
Mentorship for black women	Mainly male mentors	*"…you are being mentored by a man, he doesn't understand your challenges, …, the coaching explored was not even right. It didn't*

		go well, didn't address any of the challenges".
	Under-representation limits the ability to have mentors sharing similar experiences	*"On mentors because in the industry it's mainly men, so. My growth aspiration doesn't link up to female leaders, whereby I could have a female that relates to me who can help me. I still need to find mentors that are male because the industry just has predominantly male leaders".*
	Lack of mentorship programmes	*" We don't have any mentorship programmes. I don't know anyone that is doing what I did except for that one friend of mine that's not doing this anymore".*

4.3.1 Race and gender as an intersection

Two questions were asked, the first question was for the respondents **to describe their career journey in the ICT sector as a black female.** This question aims to understand the black female's career journey. Participants described their entry into the ICT sector through various routes. The journeys often began in entry-level positions such as internships, with a strong emphasis on initiative and the desire for growth. Questions pertaining to their career journey and the barriers encountered reveal critical insights into the structural obstacles that impede career progression for black women in the ICT field. This reflects a common trajectory where determination plays a key role in advancing one's career.The participants

described a clear trajectory in their careers, starting from internships and moving up to significant roles such as IT project managers.

Of the 16 interviewed participants 90% reported that they often found themselves as the only black female in predominantly homogenous work environments. This unique position brought about a host of challenges, particularly relating to feelings of isolation and the struggle to prove oneself in a space where representation was minimal. This isolation often contributed to feelings of invisibility, that their experience was not valued and being overlooked for opportunities.

Another common theme emerged around the lack of clear pathways for advancement. Participants consistently expressed uncertainty about how to progress within their organisations, particularly as they navigated their early careers. This participant states that while the rest of the males were all placed in specific engineering roles she was alone placed in a new role which had no clear roadmap. This is supported by her statement "*The role wasn't defined clearly. And so I really had to just figure out what I should do*".

One of the participants mentioned that after graduation she immediately began her career within an organisation which is a major player in the IT sector. This entry point provided a foundation for her understanding of the industry and was a crucial step in her professional journey. The issue of career advancement emerged as a critical concern. Several participants noted that, despite their qualifications and efforts, they frequently encountered barriers when it came to promotion.

A recurring sense of frustration became apparent, as supported by one of the participants stating that, "*I still think that the gender disparities like you ask how many people like the demographics in my team looking at a team*

of eight and having one female that just shows that there are barriers of entry for women".

A notable aspect of the analysis was the varied experiences among participants, particularly regarding the navigation of careers early on and the challenges they encountered throughout their careers. The broader analysis revealed challenging experiences among black women in ICT. Many participants noted that while they were motivated to enter the field, systemic barriers, including biases and discrimination, impacted their ability to thrive. This is supported by the statement "*When I first joined the organisation, it was still in the early stages of transformation. The team was predominantly made up of older white males, and I was one of the very few black women on the team".*

The second question posed under intersectionality was whether **there are specific barriers that have affected the black female's career progression or made her miss out on leadership opportunities**. This question addressed specific barriers that affected their progression.There is a perception that the IT industry is not designed to support women, especially in technical roles, thereby causing barriers to progress. The participants brought up the gender imbalance within the ICT sector. Most of the respondents observed a deficiency of support among female peers, suggesting a challenging environment for women to thrive, particularly in technical roles.

The participant discussed the impact of being a single mother on career progression and noted that, "*As a single mom... the priority has always been my kid"*, and notes how this influences perceptions of availability and commitment within the workplace, making it more difficult to engage in socialising opportunities that could facilitate career advancement. Another participant noted that, "*The IT industry is not… designed for females, especially in technical roles. They know you have a family, so you can sort*

of already tell that you are less trusted... it feels like the guys get better opportunities".

There was a clear frustration regarding the inconsistencies in promotion processes, where a participant shared that, *"I would be told... we're going to go through a probation process",* suggesting a disparity in the treatment of employees based on race and gender. The participant felt that others received full promotions without similar scrutiny, adding that "*Others did not go through it".* An additional aspect cited was the lack of initiative in applying for roles. This participant stated that, *"I haven't been granted the role because I'm a female... I've never applied for a role and been denied",* but does recognise that the context of willingness to apply is influenced by the surrounding environment and prevailing norms.

Leadership opportunities may favour those who can readily assert themselves, which may inadvertently disadvantage women who are still navigating voice and presence in the workplace. There is an acknowledgment of cultural biases impacting opportunities. A participant shared that, "*They tend to bring in other non black races... for major projects"*, which suggests a preference for certain demographics that may exclude others, particularly black colleagues. The intersection of gender, race, and family responsibilities contributes to significant hurdles for career progression and recognition in leadership roles.

Observations regarding the leadership structure reinforced a sense of stagnation. One participant observed that *"There are few opportunities when it comes to leadership"*, highlighting a rigid hierarchy that does not easily allow for ascending roles, especially for underrepresented individuals. The struggle for recognition despite competence and contributions was highlighted by a participant: "*They don't see you as an employee",* reflecting a sentiment where achievements are overlooked. Women often struggle to articulate their viewpoints in male-dominated spaces, requiring them to

repeat their contributions to be acknowledged. According to one participant, "*You would even say something, but you have to say it again and again just to be heard... you are less trusted as a woman",* further noting that, "*Just having the voice being able to own your voice and take up space. That has been the biggest challenge*".

4.3.2 Stereotypes of being a black woman

The question asked was **whether the woman faced any challenges in her career due to gender and racial stereotypes associated with being a black woman.** The majority of respondents highlighted a need for workplaces to be more accommodating and to challenge traditional views that prioritise a male-dominated work culture. The perception is that the IT industry is not designed to support black women, especially in technical roles, contributing to barriers to progress. The women often encounter the challenge of suppressing their femininity to fit in. This is a recurring feeling from the women as they felt pressured to embrace more traditionally masculine behaviours to gain acceptence in the workplace, leading to personal discomfort and identity conflicts.

Of the participants, 80% shared that the dynamics of being a black woman presented a stereotype that portrays black women as excessively confrontational or aggressive when they express their frustrations or stand up for themselves, as supported by the statement: "*As you progress, you learn how to navigate them and you learn how to kinda stand up and have your own voice".*

During the interviews with the participants, one shared that, she had a strong desire to move away from being categorised into public sector managing roles, stating, *"I made a conscious decision 10 years ago that I will never work in the public sector again because I can. I'm more than qualified..."* She felt like a diversity hire for the organisation to meet diversity quota than being hired on merit.

The majority of the participants highlighted that it was expected of them to be the one organising refreshments and take minutes during a meeting as if the black woman was expected to take on an administrative and supportive role. One participant shared an interesting perspective on her career, stating, "*I can't say I've faced a lot of barriers because again, I was in roles that are, I guess, largely left for women*". Her comment highlights that her initial position in an administrative role did not come with the same level of challenges that others encountered in more technical or roles that males would be in. This experience of this participant reflects a nuanced comprehension of how the gendered aspects of certain roles can shape perceptions of barriers and opportunities.

The participant emphasizes how discrimination is often indirect, with biases influencing perceptions of competence and authority without overt acknowledgment. This creates a persistent pressure to prove oneself. There is a consistent frustration regarding the lack of acknowledgment for achievements as compared to male counterparts, which reinforces feelings of being marginalised in professional settings. The pressure to constantly demonstrate competence can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration, especially when facing biases from both colleagues and clients.

Women endure societal pressures when entering meetings, according to a participant: "*People complain about the smallest things because it's just automatically assumed that I do not know what I'm doing".* There is a recognition that achievements may not be equally recognised or rewarded, potentially leading to resentment and questioning of meritocracy within the workplace.

One important finding that was not expected was the theme of age, in that older and more mature women were preferred for managerial roles. The participants between the ages of 25 and 35 were passed over for a

managerial role due to their younger age. The person explained that, *"I don't think mine or in that experience was necessarily because of my gender, but I think it was age more than anything".* This further exacerbated feelings of being unqualified or not belonging in predominantly male spaces. Participants highlighted how age can lead to the undervaluation of their skills and hinder career advancement.

The question asked was **how the woman perceived the value of her contributions, whether she felt adequately recognised, and if she encountered any challenges in gaining acknowledgment from her peers.**The majority of participants expressed that they felt less valued. They reported frequently needing to prove their competence as they experienced additional scrutiny. The demands of technical roles were identified as burdensome, and the women felt less trusted, noting that, "… *it's not clear, but you can see and sense but because maybe I am female taking lightly but if a counterpart says the same taken differently*". Another participant shared a similar experience, *that "but again and again I think this is difficult because it's such a difficult thing to prove, right."* The participants also expressed the experience of micro-aggressions which often undermined their authority and felt the need to demonstrate absolute competence to gain credibility in their roles, often facing scepticism from others regarding their expertise.

There was criticism of the "boys' club" mentality where women feel sidelined and undervalued in team dynamics. One participated stated that, "*I'm not going to go to a bar for drinks afterwards, particularly with adult males. When you find yourself being the minority, extreme minority*".

The participant mentioned the struggle for trust and credibility, which often reduced her visibility and access to growth opportunities: *"As a black female, you kind of have to prove yourself before people trust you".* The expectation of having to work harder to earn the same recognition as her

peers signifies not only the personal toll such dynamics can take but also raises awareness of the systemic challenges. Her narrative serves as a powerful call to recognize and address these inequities, advocating for a shift in perception and treatment of black women.

The discussions touched on the inadequacy of organisations in acknowledging and supporting the unique challenges faced by professionals from diverse backgrounds, particularly in the global context. Participants noteds the challenge of being a female in a highly competitive environment, sharing that, *“If you are a female and you are achieving or over achieving, you’re not celebrated. It’s almost that it’s downplayed”.* Many recounted experiences of being perceived through a lens of preconceived notions based on gender and race, highlighting the additional effort required by them to demonstrate competence.

Participants highlighted the inequalities in recognition and support offered to male counterparts. She recounted feeling sidelined and overlooked, noting, “*I was getting into that team where there are no black women*”. Thes feeling of being undervalued was amplified: *“Even though you are overperforming, you still… are not getting the reward and the recognition that you deserve*”.

4.3.3 Mentorship for black women

A question posed was **whether black women had a mentor or sponsor and if they received constructive criticism in their working environment**. The aim of these question was to gauge the candidate’s professional development needs and identify the support systems available within the organisation. Asking about mentorship assesses the participant’s self-awareness and acknowledgment of the significance of guidance. Additionally, questions regarding obstacles to accessing mentorship, experiences with constructive feedback, and the presence of sponsorship shed light on barriers and support related to career advancement.

Collectively, these questions provided important perspectives on the experiences of the candidates and their integration within the company culture.

Most of the participants expressed that they struggled to identify mentors who understand their specific experiences and challenges. One of the participants questioned, "*Do we have the right people that should be rooting for us?*", signifying the critical role that mentorship and advocacy play in career advancement. While formal mentorship remains elusive, some participants actively engage in informal mentorship arrangements. This involves seeking advice and support from peers and colleagues, which, although beneficial, lacks the structure and intentionality of formalised programmes.

The role of management in encouraging an inclusive environment is critical. The majority of interviewees expressed the importance of having female leaders who can mentor and support other women. The issues pertaining to hiring and promotion decisions were raised, especially concerning male managers favouring male candidates over black females. The minority of black females emphasized the need to leave the industry due to a lack of support and guidance on navigating challenges. One participant highlighted the fact that they did not have a mentor and planned to leave industry. She shared that, "Not looking to grow, would like to change".

Participants observed that there is lack of women in leadership positions within their organisations, reflecting a broader issue in the industry. According to one participant, this underrepresentation limits the ability of women to find mentors within their field and perpetuates the gender imbalance in decision-making positions. The statistics within her team (three females in a group of fifteen) illustrate the gender imbalance in the ICT sector. She noted a lack of support among female peers, suggesting a challenging environment for women to thrive, particularly in technical roles.

A participant shared that, *“again you are being coached by a man, he doesn’t understand your challenges, coaching by a man, the coaching explored was not even right. It didn’t go well, didn’t address any of the challenges”.* Participants also voiced concerns regarding cultural barriers within mentorship interactions, including experiences of racism and misunderstandings that hinder productive relationships. These barriers contribute to a reluctance among some women to engage fully in mentorship opportunities.

According to a participant, *“on mentors because in the industry it’s mainly men, so my growth aspiration doesn’t link up to female leaders, whereby I could have a female that relates to me who can help me. I still need to find mentors that are female because the industry just has predominantly male leaders”.* The discourse surrounding mentoring indicates that while many women have interacted with male mentors, these relationships often fail to address the specific challenges of women, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds in male-dominated sectors.

4.3.4 Pay disparity for black women

The question posed was: **Have you ever faced challenges regarding your salary, particularly given that black women are often offered lower salaries compared to their male counterparts? If so, do you believe that your identity as a black woman influenced those experiences?** Participants revealed a clear and persistent theme of unequal compensation in the workplace, which is frequently driven by intersecting racial and gender biases. A participant shared that, "*I've had situations where I found out that someone with less experience was getting paid more than me. It was discouraging, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was because I'm a black woman".*

Participants articulated their frustration at receiving significantly lower remuneration while performing the same roles as their colleagues, with many perceiving that their race and gender are central factors contributing to this inequality, as one participant noted: "*I've had to constantly remind people of my achievements and even then, I'm not compensated fairly for the value I add. It's like they expect me to just accept less because I'm a black female".*

The compounded effect of these biases results in black women not only being undervalued with regard to remuneration but also being overlooked for promotion and career advancement opportunities. This systemic disparity is particularly disheartening when coupled with a lack of accountability from employers. Many women reported that their concerns regarding pay disparities were often met with insufficient action or lack of meaningful change.

The emotional toll of this inequality is profound, as participants expressed feelings of frustration. Despite recognising their worth, many black women reported feeling powerless to address the pay gap, often due to fears of retaliation or a lack of institutional support. Some of the participants pointed

out the significance of collective advocacy and the push for pay transparency within organisations.

4.3.5 Work - life Balance

The question posed was **In what ways do you think race and gender expectations impact how you or other black women who are expected to manage work-life balance?** The point of this question was to highlight the complex underlying forces surrounding work-life balance, and addressing the pressures being experienced. Many black women often juggle professional obligations with extensive family and caregiving responsibilities, frequently as single mothers. This dual role can lead to increased stress, as they strive to meet the demands of their careers while also fulfilling their responsibilities at home.

The participant shared that *"Being a black woman means juggling multiple expectations. At work, I'm expected to excel, but at home, as a single parent, there are responsibilities that often come first".* This reflects the struggle for work-life balance, as many carry the burden of caregiving alongside their professional roles. The demands of the industry often clash with family responsibilities, leading to a preference for male candidates for roles requiring travel or additional commitment. According to the participant, *"The IT industry is not designed for females, especially like technical rules. You know for females to thrive because of their demands on your time".* The demands of the sector, including being present at home, adds complexity to time management and personal life.

The struggle to balance personal ambitions with societal expectations can create a sense of frustration, leading women to feel sidelined in their careers. As one participant explained, "*It's sort of would be preferred if the male counterpart travels or takes on the promotion simply because the women are the primary caretakers for some reason*". Many women expressed a marked difference in their work-life balance before and after

marriage, further indicating that juggling work and personal life becomes increasingly challenging once family responsibilities come into play. She shared "...*after being married, it's a bit of a struggle... you can't balance your social life with your work*". An initial sense of balance as a single woman contrasted with struggles after marriage, indicating a shift in personal responsibilities that impacted her work-life balance.

A participant shared that "*people are scared of having babies, how does that affect projects, taking leave, annual leave, very fast paced – little bit more accepting".* It highlights the difficulties that black women encounter in reconciling their professional responsibilities with personal decisions about starting a family, particularly in a high-pressure work environment. The fear of having babies due to potential impacts on projects.

4.4 Summary

Black women in ICT often experience slower career progression compared to their male and non-black colleagues. The data analysis identified the factors causing these disparities and the effect on black women's careers.The data presented provided awareness into the intersectional obtacles faced by Black women in ICT and the barriers they encounter.

Despite acknowledging systemic challenges shaped by historical context, many women nonetheless emphasized their agency in navigating career paths. Overall, the review emphasizes the need for organisational change, intentional mentorship, and a supportive community to encourage diversity and fairness within the workplace.

CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the interpretation of the results as shared in chapter four. The focus is on the intersecting barriers faced by black women in the workplace. The findings reveal significant barriers in accessing mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, alongside persistent pay disparities and difficulties with work-life balance. The findings are examined in detail, discussing what they mean in the context of the research questions. This includes exploring how the results align with, or contradict, existing literature.

The objective of this research was to examine the barriers that impede black women's career progression. Specifically, the research question investigated: "What are the barriers to career advancement faced by black women in the ICT sector?" The findings suggest that black women encounter systemic discrimination and bias in hiring, promotion, and leadership opportunities, which significantly hinder their career advancement. These barriers are further compounded by racial and gender stereotypes, organisational culture, and societal norms, resulting in disparities in career outcomes compared to their male and non-black counterparts.

5.2 Summary of key findings

The data revealed common barriers to career advancement, including lack of intersectionality of race and gender, stereotypes linked to being a black woman, pay disparities for black women, work-life balance and mentorship.

5.2.1 Race and gender as an intersection

The data suggests that most of the participants found themselves being the only black female in their teams which exacerbated feelings of isolation and highlighted the lack of representation. This can affect an individual's sense of belonging but also limits their career progression. As Smith, Bell and Nkomo (2022), Gradin, (2021) and Roche et al., (2023) suggest that black women often are confronted with many obstacles in trying to achieve leadership positins compared to their white counterparts. Participants frequently described feelings of being overlooked for promotions and opportunities, particularly in teams characterised by male dominance. This systemic oversight contributed to a stagnation in their career progress and aspirations.

Participants expressed their determination to succeed in their fields; however, systemic biases and discrimination often prevented their aspirations. The integral challenges within these workplace structures reveal significant barriers that black women must confront. The results highlight the critical necessity for organisations to implement structural modifications to address the ongoing gender and racial disparities evident in the ICT sector.The lack of institutional support further compounds these issues, leaving many feeling undervalued and overlooked. Kenny et al. (2019) and Krishnan et al. (2022) emphasize the challenges experienced by black women. These comprise a distinct set of obstacles that emanate from the intersection of race and gender (Smith, Bell & Nkomo, 2022 and Taylor, 2024). This dual disadvantage can lead to compounded discrimination, making it harder for them to navigate career pathways (Brahm, 2019). The intersectionality of their identities influences their visibility and credibility in the workplace, often resulting in exclusionary practices that hinder advancement (Ndweni, 2021; Nupen & Jagernath, 2022 and Mentusova, 2023). The promotion pathways often favour those who fit the dominant cultural mold, further perpetuating the cycle of

underrepresentation and inequity, further contributing to slow systemic transformational processes (Netto et al., 2020).

5.2.2 Stereotypes of being a black woman

Stereotypical perceptions of black women can contribute significantly to their professional challenges. These stereotypes often portray them as aggressive or less competent, which can undermine their authority and reduce opportunities for leadership roles (Motro, 2022 and Ridgeway, Korn & Williams, 2022). Such preconceived notions affect how colleagues and superiors perceive their potential, ultimately limiting their career growth.

Participants frequently described feelings of being overlooked for promotions and opportunities, particularly in teams characterised by male dominance (Ghazi, 2022). Women expressed as they were expected to be caregivers, when they would be expected to organise refreshments for team meetings or take on the administrative roles. This caused frustration and there was lack of recognition for their contributions compared to their male counterparts. Their successes was frequently downplayed, leading to feelings of disillusionment and the belief that they need to put in more effort to succeed and receive the same acknowledgment.

This systemic oversight contributed to a stagnation in their career progress and aspirations. Kenny (2020); Klasen and Minayam (2021), and Ridgeway et al. (2022) suggest that black females have to put in additional effort in order to prove their value otherwise they are overlooked for promotion. This could be due to a range of reasons such as pigeonholing, where they were expected to be managing public sector customers simply because they are black and female. This is negative stereotyping of how their skills and potential are perceived.

The demands of the industry often clash with family responsibilities for black women, as they encounter pressure to meet professional expectations while

navigating caregiving roles, leading to stress and feelings of guilt when trying to balance both spheres. Several participants reflected on their experiences being influenced by their race and gender, sharing stories of feeling overlooked for promotions or believed to be less capable than their male counterparts. Many women felt they lacked the same opportunities as male colleagues and were not adequately recognised for their contributions, leading to diminished confidence and motivation. This is caused by organisations that lack diversity, equity and inclusion (Ndweni & Ozumba, 2021).

Most respondents highlighted the deeply ingrained cultural obstacles that hinder women's progress, often rooted in traditional views of gender roles (Ndweni & Ozumba, 2021). Conversely, some women expressed optimism for the future, noting that industries are slowly evolving to become more inclusive of women's perspectives and needs. This contrast emphasizes a tension between current experiences and potential future improvements.

The findings from the interviews indicate a pervasive male dominance within the ICT sector. Participants reported that many workplaces within this field were predominantly male, which contributed to a culture wherein women frequently felt overlooked or undervalued. This male-centric environment furthered an atmosphere of exclusion, where female employees often perceived themselves as lacking, not belonging or not having adequate support (Nupen & Jagernath, 2022).

5.2.3 Mentorship for black women

There are insufficient mentors within the ICT sector with whom black women can relate, leading to challenges in career advancement and professional growth (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Research suggests that effective mentorship is necessary for success, as it provides essential support, networking opportunities, and insights into navigating complex workplace dynamics (Nkomo et al., 2019 and Rabelo et al., 2020). However, many

black women stated that they experience challenges in identifying mentors who understand their unique experiences and can offer pertinent guidance. Participants frequently expressed frustration about the absence of formal mentorship relationships, highlighting that their efforts to seek mentorship often fell short, especially when it came to identifying suitable female mentors who can relate to their specific challenges.

5.2.4 Pay disparities for black women.

The problem of pay disparity is significant, as black women in the ICT sector frequently earn less than their white male colleagues as well as black male colleagues in comparable positions. This inequity not only affects their financial well-being but can also undermine their ability to invest in professional development, further entrenching the barriers to advancement.

Research reveals that black women earn less than their white male colleagues (Bambo, 2023 and Susanthi et al., 2023). The ICT sector in South Africa can be highly segmented, with black women often concentrated in lower paying and less prestigious roles (Quan, 2020; Griffin, 2020; Segovia-Pérez, 2020). This segmentation perpetuates inequalities and limits their earning potential.

Black woman in ICT have to navigate two layers of bias - being overlooked for promotions and not being valued equally in salary discussions in relation to their contributions (Bosch & Tijdens, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2022). The data indicates a lack of black women in decision-making roles, leading to their needs and contributions being overlooked. Representation is essential, not just for visibility, but also for promoting more equitable pay.

5.2.5 Work-life balance

Managing work-life balance poses difficulties for black women. The demands of caregiving and family responsibilities, combined with the high expectations placed on them at work, can lead to burnout. This imbalance

can divert focus and energy away from career advancement opportunities, making it difficult to pursue promotions or higher positions (Munyeka et al., 2022 & Etlyn et al., 2019). Work-life balance emerged as a substantive concern for participants, especially for those who are single parents.

Numerous participants expressed concerns regarding organisational structures and cultures that were not inherently supportive of gender equality. Although some leadership initiatives aimed to promote female leadership, the inconsistent implementation and insufficient impact of these programmes left many women feeling unsupported and disengaged from career advancement initiatives (Bala et al., 2022 and Cromwell, 2023).

Research suggests that women often prioritize family responsibilities, which can conflict with their professional commitments, leading to stigma and concerns about their performance (Etlyn et al., 2019, Bavitha, 2021 and Bala et al., 2022). Participants highlighted the struggle to attain work-life balance, with many women having to manage family obligations alongside their professional responsibilities.

5.3 Conclusion

The narratives of the participants reflect resilience and a proactive approach to career challenges. Their experiences underline the importance of adaptability, relationship building, and the pursuit of growth in a fast-paced, ever-changing professional landscape. The balance between personal life and career remains a critical and evolving challenge that they navigate daily.

These insights illustrate a persistent struggle for women to gain equal opportunities and recognition in the workplace, particularly within sectors that demand significant technical expertise. The combination of societal expectations and workplace dynamics creates hurdles that can impede career advancement for black women in the ICT sector.

Many black women encounter barriers related to both race and gender, which amplify their feelings of exclusion in mostly male-dominated work environments. Additionally, internal workplace cultures that favour certain demographics can create an environment where black women feel overlooked. The recurring mention of inequitable promotion practices highlights the struggle for recognition and the hurdles in attaining leadership roles. Even when qualifications and performance are comparable, biases can manifest in the evaluation process, with individuals from other racial backgrounds being perceived as receiving more favourable treatment.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

The table below provides a concise summary of the overall methodology employed in the research actions, addressing the research questions as outlined.

Table 4. Consistency table: research questions, propositions, data collection and data analysis

Research Question	Proposition	Data Collection	Data Analysis
What are the barriers to career advancement faced by black women in the Information and Communication Technology sector in South Africa?	Black women encounter systemic discrimination and bias in hiring, promotion, and leadership opportunities within the ICT industry, which negatively impact their career progression. Furthermore, these barriers are influenced by both racial and gender stereotypes, organisational culture, and societal norms, leading to disparities in career outcomes as compared to their male and non-black counterparts.	Interviews with 16 Middle management women in ICT.	**Race and gender as an intersection**: Black women often face both racial and gender-based discrimination that affects their professional growth and recognition. **Stereotypes of being a black woman:** The majority are seen as aggressive which undermine their professional credibility. **Mentorship for black women**: The majority of the participants expressed that they struggled to identify mentors who understand their specific experiences and challenges. **Pay disparities for black women:** They receive significantly lower remuneration while performing the same roles as their colleagues. **Work-life balance**: They juggle demanding professional responsibilities alongside cultural expectations and caregiving roles

6.2 Study Limitations

The primary limitation lies in the small sample size and the absence of diversity, with only 16 participants interviewed. A larger study would yield more insights.

This study did not consider male perspectives. A narrow focus was on a specific black women within ICT, which may not adequately reflect the wider encounters of all women. Male perspectives were not considered in this study.

The lack of diversity in geographical locations and organisational contexts may limit the generalisability of the results. The dependence on self-reported information from interviews can introduce subjectivity, potentially distorting the understanding of barriers encountered by black women in ICT and leading to inaccurate representations of their experiences.

The timing of the data collection limits the findings, as they may be affected by the socio-economic and political climate of the period, which can change. This complicates long-term conclusions about pay disparities, emphasising the need for ongoing research on these evolving challenges.

6.3 Future research

A larger scale of research could be conducted in another industry.

A study taking into account male voices and their perspective on the barriers experienced by black women could provide additional valuable insights to the discourse.

Since age emerged as a prominent theme during the interviews with participants, future research should explore the multifaceted impacts of age-related biases in various professional environments.

These studies could provide valuable insights when aiming to create equitable environments that support the career advancement of black women.

The challenges presented by the participants appeared to be continuous, with limited effort being made by employers to address such concerns. This resulted in some women opting to exit the ICT sector in pursuit of alternative career paths. Others express satisfaction in maintaining their current roles as specialists, perceiving management positions as potentially detrimental to their career advancement due to systemic barriers and limited support. These individuals also recognise the financial advantages and career stability offered by subject matter expertise.

6.4 Recommendations

In light of the insights gathered from participants and the challenges they expressed, the following suggested to empower black women in their professional journeys and promote a more inclusive workplace. These strategies aim to encourage resilience, leverage support networks, and improve systemic changes within the industry. By embracing these approaches, individuals can better navigate obstacles and contribute to a more equitable environment.

6.4.1 Recommendations for black women in ICT

It is important to acknowledge the gendered and racialised experiences that influence professional growth and to adopt an oppositional stance when necessary. Rather than viewing oneself as a passive victim or presuming membership in an in-group, take ownership of the journey and empower

oneself to forge an individual path instead of relying on others, enabling one to navigate challenges effectively.

It is recommended that individuals in the ICT industry adopt proactive strategies, such as leveraging personal networks and established relationships for support. Black women should cultivate a strong and proactive mentality, characterised by determination and resilience in their pursuit of career opportunities. It is vital to balance this tenacity with humility and openness to feedback while remaining authentic and confident in their abilities.

It is critical to establish mentorship relationships. Aspiring individuals should actively seek mentors, particularly those who can understand and relate to their unique challenges. Emphasizing the importance of mutual support within networks can promote growth. Surrounding oneself with competent and supportive peers is vital. Engaging with networks of women who aspire to grow within the field can cultivate an environment of encouragement and shared learning.

Young women in technology should embrace their identity and distinct approach to problem-solving as being advantages in a male-dominated field. Valuing different perspectives and approaches can differentiate them from their male counterparts.

Investing in professional development through certifications and education is important. A commitment to lifelong learning can enhance career prospects and prepare individuals for emerging roles in technology. Individuals should value their knowledge and qualifications, and believe that they are as good as the next person.

Maintaining resilience and developing the ability to deal maturely with negative experiences is necessary due to the challenges in the field. Black women should be encouraged to view setbacks as learning opportunities and continuously strive for improvement.

6.4.2 Recommendations for ICT organisations

Encourage women entering the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields to start much earlier, with greater emphasis on introducing young girls to fields like computer engineering. Increasing female participation at early educational levels and throughout the industry is critical for encouraging a more inclusive workplace culture.

The implementation of leadership programmes aimed at empowering women is seen as necessary, though many believe that action has yet to match rhetoric. There is a need for the human resources functionto take a more active role in ensuring fairness and support for female employees. Ensuring that policies are implemented effectively is crucial to an inclusive environment. Human resources needs to address gender and racial disparities and to hold organisations accountable for creating a more equitable space.

Organisations should establish committees focused on advancing diversity and inclusion initiatives. These committees should involve both male and female representatives to foster a more inclusive dialogue on gender equity.

Organisations must develop measurable KPIs related to diversity initiatives and hold themselves accountable for progress. It's essential that gender empowerment efforts move beyond mere tokenism and encourage substantial change.

Empowerment programmes should be structured to provide genuine support rather than serving as ceremonial or symbolic gestures. Organisations should work towards encouraging environments where women feel appreciated and professionally supported.

Communities within the workplace should encourage women to regularly connect, share experiences, discuss career advancement strategies, and

explore mentorship opportunities. Development programmes for aspiring leaders should be a priority, focusing not only on female participants, but also including training that helps break down biases among all employees who organise regular leadership conferences and training sessions specifically for women. It is essential to establish platforms for knowledge-sharing and promote networking for nurturing female leaders in ICT.

Organisations should create a safe space for dialogue, as can raise awareness and lead to more inclusive practices. Additionally, actively highlighting successful women in ICT roles can serve as inspiration for others while keeping their contributions visible can change perceptions regarding women's capabilities in the industry.

By adopting these recommendations, black women in the ICT sector can strive to establish an equitable, supportive, and inclusive environment that empowers women to excel in technology-related fields.

6.5 Action plans

Table 5 below presents an overview of the intended action plans for black women and organisations in ICT.

Table 5: Action plans for black women

Action Item	Description	Resources needed
Pursue relevant education and continuous learning	Identify relevant formal education, certification and ensure keeping updated with industry trends	• Universities • Online platforms
Digital partnership programme	Launch a peer-led digital partnership programme to empower employees in supporting black women in the workplace.	• Collaborators • Communication tools
Build strong networks	Join tech communities, seek mentors and sponsors	• Tech meetups • Conferences • LinkedIn
Develop soft skills	Learn negotiation skills, Leadership and communication	• Identify workshops • Public speaking • Negotiation skill workshops

Table 6: Action plans for ITC organisations

Action Item	Description	Resources needed
Personal Development Retreats	Host retreats for black women across industries and career levels focused on personal and professional development	• Venue • Facilitators
The “Visibility Month” Initiative	Establish an annual “Visibility Month” to celebrate the achievements of black women in the organisation and industry	• Social media promotions • Panel discussions • Guest speaker events that keep the focus on their contributions
Digital partnership programme	Launch a peer-led digital partnership programme to empower employees in supporting black women in the workplace.	• Collaborators • Communication tools
Real Time feedback	Create a real-time feedback system using data analytics to monitor wokplace climate and employee experiences.	• Survey platforms • Analytics software

6.6 Concluding summary

This study aligns with and is intended to augment the existing literature. The voices of 16 black females presently employed in the Information, Communication and Technology sector in South Africa in 2024 have been illuminated. Women have been integral to the workplace for many decades but their situation has not progressed as quickly as expected. Organisational culture influences the opportunities afforded to a young black women within the organisation. This is strongly influenced by the fact, as noted by the participants to the study, that the ICT industry is heavily male-dominated, leading to challenges in gaining trust and recognition, particularly for females and black individuals in general.

This research reveals how the intersectionality of race and gender infuences the experiences of black women in ICT, emphasizing the systemic barriers that need to be addressed. These findings can contribute to develop more inclusive leadership strategies and promote equity within the ICT sector.

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APPENDIX A

The research instrument: Interview questions

Candidate: Participant 1 (name hidden for confidentiality)

Current Role:

_____

Organisation:

_____

Age (range): 25 – 35 36 – 45 46 – 55 +56

ICT specific qualification

First Degree:

_____

Post Grad:

_____

Years of experience:

_____

Interview Questions:

Intersectionality

1. Can you describe your career journey in the ICT sector as a black female
2. Are there specific barriers that have affected your career progression or made you miss out on leadership opportunities?

Stereotypes of being a black woman

3. Have you faced any challenges in your career due to gender and racial stereotypes of being a black woman?
4. In your experience as a black female team member, how do you perceive the value of your contributions? Do you feel adequately recognised or do you encounter any challenges in being acknowledged by your peers?

Pay disparity for black women

5. Have you ever faced challenges regarding your salary, particularly given that black women are often offered lower salaries compared to

their male counterparts? If so, do you believe that your identity as a black woman influenced those experiences?

Work-life balance

6. In what ways do you think race and gender expectations impact how you or other black women are expected to manage work-life balance?

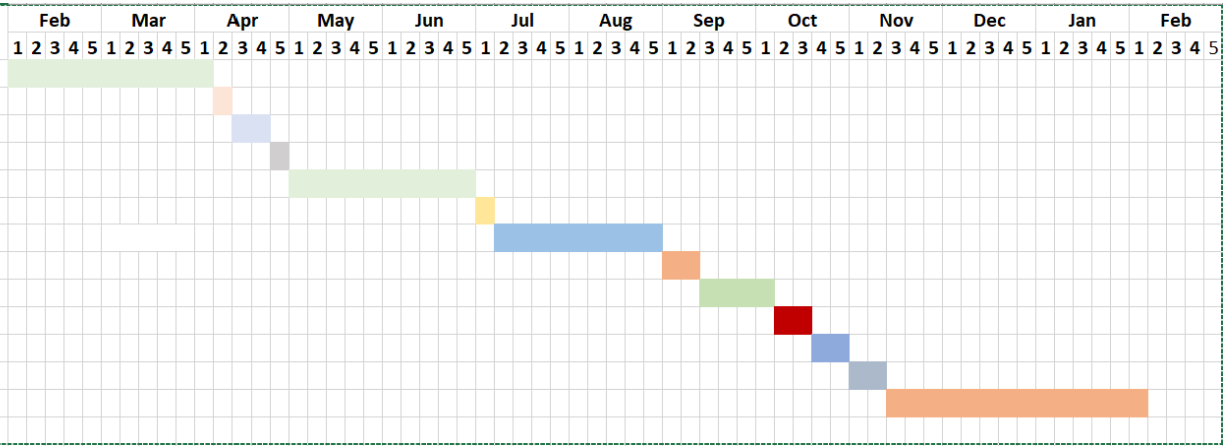
Mentorship for black women

7. Do you have a mentor?
    a. Have you encountered any obstacles in accessing mentorship as a black woman?
    b. Can you describe a time when you received constructive feedback or coaching that helped you grow professionally as a black woman
    c. Do you have a sponsor (someone that provides support regarding your career within theorganisation) withing the organisation you work for? How did this come about? Are you mentoring anyone?

Appendix B

Timelines

Research Timeline	What?	Target Date	Status	Duration
Preparatory Work	Literature Review	01-Feb-24	Completed	20 weeks
	Research Design		Completed	
	Instrument Development		Completed	
	Panel		Completed	
	Ethical Approval		Completed	
Qualitative Data Collection	Recruitment emails		Completed	12 weeks
	Interviews		Completed	
	Transcript		Completed	
Data Analysis	Coding		Completed	16 weeks
	Theme Identification		Completed	
	Interpretation		Completed	
	Validation		Completed	
Writing and Dissemination	Draft Findings		Completed	16 weeks


Feb
Mar
Apr
May
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