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# Accelerating the advancement of black women leaders in corporate South Africa

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# ACCELERATING THE ADVANCEMENT OF BLACK WOMEN LEADERS IN CORPORATE SOUTH AFRICA

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*"If you have a sense of purpose that drives you, then aim high and become a leader and make room as you go".* - Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala

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## ABSTRACT

As of 2022, the disparity in corporate South Africa's top management positions were evident, with only 11% of Black women holding such roles, contrasting starkly with the 53.1% representation of white males in similar positions. Examining the progression over the preceding four years, the data from 2017 reveals that Black women occupied 14.2% of board positions, indicating a modest 6% increase during that period. This information substantiates the observation that Black women face substantial underrepresentation in high-ranking corporate roles within South Africa and that their advancement to these positions has been notably sluggish.

The study's theoretical framework employed a comprehensive approach by integrating three interconnected perspectives: Intersectionality Theory, Organisational Leadership Theories, and Marxist Feminist Theory. This triangulation offered a nuanced exploration of the factors influencing the acceleration of Black women leaders to top positions.

A deliberate selection process involved choosing 8 Black women leaders from 7 companies and 1 state-owned entity for participation in this study. The selected individuals participated in either face-to-face interviews or virtual open-ended question sessions through video conferencing platforms, Zoom or Microsoft Teams. During these interactions, the participants candidly discussed their career paths to executive positions, highlighted obstacles faced during their journeys, and reflected on the strategies that enabled them to overcome challenges in their pursuit of leadership roles.

The participants described the challenges they encountered which in their view impeded their progress in pursuit of career advancement to senior and top management positions. The study delved into the professional journeys of these accomplished Black women leaders through semi-structured interviews. Targeting c-suite and senior-level professionals, including CEOs, CFOs, COOs, and group executives, the research explored their experiences across diverse sectors such as financial services, professional consulting, technology, government entities, and mining.

All participants, who were situated in Cape Town and Johannesburg in South Africa, were deliberately selected from the researcher's professional and personal network. Purposive sampling ensured representation from various leadership roles. This qualitative exploration, rooted in the participants' lived experiences, uncovered insights into systemic barriers, and organisational initiatives affecting the accelerated progress of Black women leaders to senior and executive positions, and the strategies which supported them in their advancement to leadership roles. The study's approach provided more information on the lived experiences of the participants, urging further research and interventions to enhance and accelerate the representation of Black women in senior corporate positions in South Africa.

The study addressed a pressing issue of transformation and diversity in corporate South Africa by offering practical solutions for Black women leaders and companies. It emphasised the significance of actively building and nurturing professional networks, mentorship, and continuous learning as pivotal strategies for Black women navigating corporate landscapes. Additionally, for companies aiming to foster diversity and inclusion, the study underscored the importance of clear communication of policies, effective mentorship and sponsorship programmes, and the promotion of an inclusive

organisational culture. Providing flexible work arrangements to support work-life balance and addressing specific challenges faced by Black women leaders were identified as key contributors to a supportive environment. The study concludes by recognising its role as a foundational exploration, shedding light on the challenges faced by Black women leaders in corporate South Africa, offering solutions, and serving as a baseline for further in-depth investigations.

**KEYWORDS**

Black women; leaders; Corporate South Africa; career advancement.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## Background of the Study

The Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report 2021-2022 stated that only 11% of Black women, in the private sector occupied top management jobs in 2022, and only 15,2% of Black women were in senior management roles (Department of Labour, 2022). This is in comparison to 53,1% of white males in top management and 37,9% of white males in senior management positions for the same period. For the purpose of this research study, the term Black women refers to women of African, Indian and Coloured race groups as per the South African government's definition (Department of Labour, 1998).

On a c-suite level, according to PwC, only seven out of all the companies on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange's Top 100 Index were led by female CEOs in 2022, and the overall representation of female CEOs and CFOs across all Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed companies were low at 8% and 22% - a marginal increase in the 2021 figures of 5% and 17% (Ebrahimi, 2022). In fact, the representation of women in the total executive population of JSE-listed companies in 2022, was 15% which was up 2% from the year before (Ebrahimi, 2022).

Recent data on JSE-listed companies highlights the sluggish progress of Black women in attaining leadership roles. Black women, (African, Coloured, and Indian women), made up 20.1% of the board positions of companies listed on the exchange, while White men dominated board positions at 46.9% of the total in 2021 (Businesswomen's Association of South Africa, 2021). In 2017, 14.2% of board positions were occupied

by Black women, demonstrating a 6% gain over four years until the present (Businesswomen's Association of South Africa, 2017), which was a very conservative average increase of 1.5% per year over that period. In 2021, Black women executive managers were 13.8% (Businesswomen's Association of South Africa, 2021), a 0.4% decline from four years earlier. These statistics demonstrate the severe underrepresentation of Black women and the slow rate at which women are appointed in senior leadership roles. Despite efforts to promote gender diversity and inclusivity, women, particularly Black women, continue to be underrepresented in executive roles (Businesswomen's Association of South Africa, 2021).

This study aimed to investigate the reasons behind the slow pace of advancement and explore strategies to accelerate the promotion of Black women to senior and top management roles in corporations. It can be deduced that if the hindrances to the advancement of Black women were identified and addressed, solutions to address these hindrances would be offered, which in turn will lead to their ascent into senior leadership roles at a much faster pace.

### 1.2 Problem Statement

The slow progress in advancing Black women in senior leadership positions is a persistent problem that requires renewed focus, energy and commitment (Smith & Nkomo, 2022). This research study sought to elucidate the challenges that are hamstringing the advancement of women in senior and top leadership roles and to explore actions that may lead to faster progress in their rise to these senior positions.

Matotoka and Odeku (2021) present the actions that South African companies have made to promote Black women to managerial positions, but Matotoka and Odeku (2021) do not provide solutions offered by these affected women themselves. It can be deduced that the actions that Matotoka and Odeku (2021) acknowledged were assumed to be efficient remedies imposed by these organisations and not by the women who impacted by these challenges. This study aimed to gather data and insights from the experiences of senior and executive women and to gather their perspectives in what is required to aid the acceleration of Black women to top positions.

Investigating and offering solutions to accelerate the ascent of Black women to senior roles, is an important focus of this study. Black women are often criticised for their inability to achieve the top echelons of corporations as their slow ascension is attributed their personal and professional abilities (Smith & Nkomo, 2022). This has also led to the women being enrolled for leadership development interventions yet the role of company practices and structures are not evaluated (Smith & Nkomo, 2022). The research explored the insights and solutions offered by the Black women participants based on their lived experiences.

The theoretical foundation of the study embraced a holistic strategy, incorporating three interlinked perspectives: Intersectionality Theory, Organisational Leadership Theories, and Marxist Feminist Theory. This triangulation sought to provide a nuanced examination of the elements shaping the progress of Black women leaders within the corporate landscape of South Africa.

Marxist feminism as a sub-division of feminist theory was considered as part of this study as it explores the economic activity of women as a theory (Greer & Greene, 2003), as well as intersectionality theory which considers the interplay of social categories such as race, gender, and class and posits that individuals' experiences are shaped by the intersection of multiple identities (Coastan, 2019).

### *1.2.1 Main Research Question*

In order to address the research study title, *Accelerating the advancement of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa*, the main research question was addressed in the study.

The main research question is:

*What strategies can facilitate the acceleration of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa to senior and executive positions according to the views of experienced top women leaders?*

The main research question explored the successful practices and strategies that according to the participants have resulted in increased representation, and the ascent of Black women to corporate leadership positions. By examining research findings and experiences from the perspective of these women, the research identified strategies to fast track the slow ascent of Black women leaders.

### *1.2.2 Secondary Research Questions*

The secondary research questions that will answer the main research question, are:

**Secondary Research Question 1:**

- *What are the factors contributing to the slow advancement of Black women leaders to senior and executive positions in corporate South Africa?*

This question aimed to explore the various barriers, challenges, and systemic factors that hinder the progression of Black women to the senior and c-suite positions in corporate South Africa. Possible factors that surfaced in the literature review included systemic racism and sexism, slower promotion rates, limited access to sponsorship, and low visibility and acceptance, among others (Smith & Nkomo, 2022).

**Secondary Research Question 2:**

- *What actions and/or strategies have been implemented by Black women leaders themselves to accelerate their progression to senior and executive positions, and what is the effectiveness of these actions and/or strategies?*

This question examined the actions and strategies these professional women employed to advance their careers to the top. It examined whether these strategies brough about the desired effect. By analysing the participants' perspective of the perceived outcomes and effectiveness of their efforts, it provided insights into the successes, challenges, and potential areas for improvement in accelerating the advancement of Black women leaders.

**Secondary Research Question 3:**

- *What initiatives and solutions that are implemented by companies are effective in helping Black women leaders to occupy senior and executive positions?*

This question aimed to identify and explore the specific actions, strategies, and interventions that can be implemented within organisations based on the insights and

experiences shared by Black women leaders. This research question focused on practical solutions and initiatives that can be implemented by corporate South Africa to facilitate the acceleration of Black women to the top rung of companies.

### *1.2.3 Justification of the main and secondary research questions*

The main and secondary research questions in this study are designed to comprehensively explore the phenomenon of accelerating the advancement of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa.

The main research question is central to the research as it seeks to identify effective strategies directly from those who have navigated the corporate ladder. By focusing on the experiences and insights of top Black women leaders, the study aims to gather nuanced and practical strategies that have proven successful in overcoming the unique barriers they face. This approach ensures that the strategies identified are grounded in real-world experiences, enhancing their relevance and applicability.

The secondary research questions are designed to delve deeper into specific aspects that contribute to or hinder the main research question's focus. These questions help to build a comprehensive understanding of the various elements influencing the advancement of Black women leaders.

The main and secondary research questions are intrinsically connected. The secondary questions provide a detailed exploration of the factors, personal strategies, and organisational interventions that influence the primary objective of the main research question. By addressing these secondary questions, the study builds a

comprehensive understanding that supports the formulation of effective strategies for the acceleration of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa.

### 1.3 Justification of the Study

This study provides insights that may be beneficial for the business sector, for the academic fields of leadership and business management, and to the anthropological aspects of the workplace and professional career planning. Aspects such as workplace culture, ethnicity, race, and identity as well as gender parity are among the key themes that were uncovered in this research project.

The stakeholder groups that will benefit from the insights gathered include female and male professionals, people management or human resources practitioners, diversity and inclusion experts and practitioners, recruitment specialists, executive search firms, executives and boards, academics in the field of business management, leadership and diversity and inclusion, psychology and leadership, and learning and development and training practitioners, trade organisations, business member organisations, and regulators and governments.

The purpose of the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) is to achieve employment equity and to eradicate unfair discrimination in the workplace (Department of Labour, 1998). From a public policy perspective, this research may provide insights into the reasons for the slow progress of the advancement of women to senior and executive positions against a government agenda of transformation and employment equity. This study may elucidate the motive of the private sector's performance relating to the advancement of women in top positions against the backdrop of the Employment

Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) and can inform potential policy changes or aid more effective adherence to the Act by corporate South Africa.

The study holds significant justification and may add value in the following ways:

- *Address a critical societal and ethical issue*

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions has significance on both societal and business fronts, regardless of the reasons behind it - it is not only a matter of fairness and equal rights but also has implications for the effectiveness and success of businesses (Loumpourdi, 2023). In order to achieve race and gender equality in leadership, businesses must prioritise the acceleration of Black and other women of colour into senior positions with a sense of urgency (Smith & Nkomo, 2022).

- *Increasing the knowledge in this research area*

While there is existing research on gender inequality in the workplace, the literature review conducted, demonstrated that there is a specific need for more research that focuses on the experiences of Black women in corporate South Africa. In the United States of America, the field of women-in-leadership research is often criticised for generating limited knowledge about the experiences of women leaders belonging to ethnic minorities (Mavin et al., 2023). This study provides a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by Black women in advancing their careers; while exploring tailored and practical strategies to address these challenges (Loumpourdi, 2023).

- *Empowering Black women leaders*

This research study's findings have the potential to empower Black women by providing them with valuable insights into the barriers they face and the strategies that can help accelerate their advancement to more senior positions. By highlighting successful practices and interventions, the study can provide guidance and support for Black women aspiring to reach senior and top management roles in corporate South Africa.

- *Enhancing corporate performance and innovation*

The literature review conducted shows that diverse leadership teams lead to enhanced corporate performance and innovation. The presence of female directors on a board in South Africa is positively associated with company performance, as it contributes to a wider knowledge base, increased creativity, and a stronger competitive advantage (Scholtz & Kieviet, 2018).

- *Informing public policy and organisational practices*

This research project's findings can inform the development of policies and practices that promote greater gender equality and diversity within organisations and at the top of these organisations and public policy reforms at a national government level. By providing evidence-based recommendations, the study can contribute to the formulation of more effective strategies, initiatives, and interventions to accelerate the path for Black women to the top boardrooms in South African business.

### 1.4 Delimitations of the Study

The study will be delimited to Black South African women that are in senior management and executive positions in corporations that have offices and/or

operations in South Africa. The experiences and insights of these women will be the basis of the study. The corporate perspective, thus the view of the corporation, albeit through male counterparts, management, or executives and/or human resources will be excluded as the main research question looks at the experience of Black women leaders and the challenges and solutions, they offer based on their credentials as seasoned leaders and professionals. The secondary research question that explores the actions and initiatives corporations can implement to support the accelerated advancement of women, will be approached from the perspective of the Black woman leader.

Detailed definitions that seek to clarify the focus of the study, are discussed in the next section.

## 1.5 Operational Definitions

### *1.5.1 Black women*

For the purpose of this study, Black women means South African women, thus people who identify as women, and who are deemed South African either through birth, descent, or naturalisation, and who identify as being African, Indian or Coloured. This is in line with the definition of Black people as per the Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment Act (No. 53 of 2003) (South African Government, 2004).

### *1.5.2 Corporate South Africa*

Corporate South Africa means all for-profit companies that have offices and/or operations in South Africa. This includes multinationals, local and foreign companies,

public-listed and private companies that have a presence in South Africa and who employ a minimum of one person in the country. This excludes non-profit organisations and public sector organisations.

### *1.5.3 Leaders*

Leaders means professionals who occupy roles on senior management and executive management levels in companies. In other words, the top and senior management of organisations. Leaders aim to guide and influence others, encouraging them to act in accordance with expectations and harnessing their potential to attain defined goals (Soeardi et al., 2022).

### *1.5.4 Career advancement*

According to a study by Sabbagha et al. (2020), career advancement involves gaining new responsibilities, higher status, and greater income within an organisational structure. Additionally, De Vos and Van der Heijden (2021) highlight that career advancement encompasses personal and professional development, driven by continuous learning and adaptability to changing job requirements.

## 1.6 Structure of the Research Paper

This research paper is structured in the following way: A literature review that focuses on past research that was executed in the area of the acceleration of the advancement of Black women leaders. The purpose of the literature review was to identify dominant research themes related to the main research topic, to identify gaps in the literature pertaining to the topic, and to provide more insights into the topic.

The literature review is followed by an explanation of the theoretical framework that forms the basis for this study, its relevance, and how the underpinnings of Marxist feminist theory direct the methodology of the study. The research methodology follows the theoretical framework, whereafter the results of the research study is discussed as well as an interpretation of the research results. This is followed by a concluding section that summarises the findings, highlights key insights, and summarises the implications of the findings for various role players or stakeholders. The key limitations will be discussed, the opportunities for further research and suggestions for the fields of leadership, business management and diversity and inclusion will be offered.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Introduction of Literature Review

The literature review seeks to explore the current research related to the topic of this research project which is the acceleration of Black women in corporate South Africa. It will also provide an overview of some of the knowledge that exists related to the research topic. The purpose of the literature review is to understand what research has been undertaken in this very relevant field for the South African economy and society, for corporations that operate in the country and for professionals who work in South Africa or who have personnel in-country, to identify relevant themes that will help elucidate the research topic, and to identify gaps in the current body of research in this field.

The secondary purpose of this study is to understand how other researchers approached similar studies. This will provide more insight into how this study may be conducted, thus providing more information on the research methods utilised in similar studies. According to Terreblanche et al. (2011), when researchers explore related research studies, it has the potential to reveal various methodologies that other researchers have utilised to study similar research problems. They also make the point that the more a research method has been utilised or tested, the more it points to the efficacy of the particular method. Terreblanche et al. (2011) state that new and innovative research methods should be considered beyond what is discovered in the literature review.

The literature review will be actualised in three ways: Firstly, through a discussion of relevant research themes in relation to the three secondary research questions, secondly, through the identification of research gaps and opportunities related to the topic, and thirdly through a discussion of the theoretical framework for this research project.

## 2.2 Research themes

The research themes which surfaced in the literature, and which relate to the three secondary research questions are:

### 2.2.1 Secondary Research Question 1: *What are the factors contributing to the slow advancement of Black women leaders to senior and executive positions in corporate South Africa?*

#### 2.2.1.1 The slow pace of transformation in corporate South Africa

In the South African context, transformation refers to the change of the old order to the new. Thus the transition from the pre-1994 apartheid government, to the democratic South Africa. Albertyn and Goldblatt (1998) indicate that transformation in South Africa requires a change of the state and of society, and the reallocation of resources and power in order to achieve equality. They also cite that transformation includes the elimination of systemic forms of domination.

This very domination and economic control continue to plague corporate South Africa with only 11% of Black women (African, Indian and Coloured race groups) occupying

top management positions and only 15,2% in senior management roles in 2022 (Department of Labour, 2022).

Apart from the numbers that government has reported on, research on the topic of transformation, in South Africa, also point to the slow progress being made in terms of employment equity at management level (April et al., 2007; Booysen, 2007a, 2007b). The local research point to the data that although gains have been made in appointing more women to senior and executive roles, that these gains have been slow which points to the need for a faster acceleration of Black female professionals.

#### 2.2.1.2 Regulation as a blunt instrument to accelerate Black women leaders

In the South African environment, one of the main tasks of government, other than running the country for its citizens as stated in the constitution, is to ensure the economic inclusion and participation of Black South Africans (Department of Labour, 2022). Thus, meaning that government not only aims to improve the lives of South Africans but aims to repair the injustices of the past, during a period when Black citizens did not fully participate in the economy and were marginalised. Transformation can thus be considered as a type of redress and a more inclusive country for everyone. Amongst the transformation goals of South Africa, the equality and economic emancipation of women is a priority.

Even though there are various regulations in place to facilitate the economic empowerment of historically disadvantaged South Africans, the economic progress of Black South Africans has been slow. There have been little changes the last two decades to (Mans-Kemp & Viviers, 2015) exposing that regulation does not have the

desired effect as the “big stick” to direct transformation in the workplace. Empirical studies in South Africa suggest that employers discriminate against female employees (Steyn & Jackson, 2014). When women are promoted in corporations, it is often due to “tick-boxing” or regulatory requirements rather than the competitive edge it provides the business (April et al., 2007). The efficacy of South African legislation to ensure the faster ascent of women to the top boardrooms of the country is thus to be questioned given the current slow ascension of these women to the c-suite and senior management.

#### 2.2.1.3. Organisational barriers to accelerating the advancement of Black women

The previous section discussed the ineffectiveness of regulation in accelerating transformation. The logical question then is to explore the reason for the reluctance amongst top management and organisations to change and enable more women to get to the top faster than the current status quo. The reason can be attributed to preservation of the status quo. Lee (2016) states that executives in South Africa characterises the “old boys club”, thus an entrenched White and male-controlled system with power by a segment of business and society who controls capital and are slow to change due to the favourable position they occupy. It can be deduced that their power position benefits them personally, commercially, and in terms of their standing in society. It will thus require a significant incentive or disincentive for them to change their very favourable position.

Government’s goals towards a more inclusive economy and their enforcement of regulation are thus inconvenient for this group and according to Lee (2016) Black

Economic Empowerment and EE aim to destroy this traditional enclave of power by accelerating the inclusion of notably Black people and women in top management and in their talent pipelines to the top.

#### 2.2.1.4. Environmental barriers to accelerating the advancement of Black women to top roles

Environmental factors occur outside the organisation and include factors such as economic and legal factors as well as technological changes, among other (Cook & Hunsaker, 2001). The aspect of culture and world view can also play a role as an environmental factor. South African economy consists of a Euro-centric culture where individualism, performance and competition are important and an Afro-centric one where solidarity, togetherness and inclusivity are important (Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011). This implies that in corporate South Africa a Euro-centric or Western top management has more power than other South African race groups who follow a more African approach to doing business given the power and influence of leaders who follows a more Western approach. It is likely that the “otherness” of Black South Africans who are mostly in the lower ranks of these organisations, is not understood or widely accepted. “White fear” as a cultural phenomenon or perception exists in corporations where White executives and professionals fear that Black professionals will take their jobs and that they will become obsolete as professionals (Booysen, 2007a).

Research on the role of leadership theory on women is poignant as it relates how leadership theory has evolved over the years and how it can play a bigger role in supporting the appointment of women in management. There has been increasing

recognition since the early 1990s in leadership literature of leadership styles that were deemed effective and that were associated with the characteristics that women embody when they lead (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Jogulu and Wood (2006) suggest that although leadership literature has been a key contributor in elevating the profile of women in management, the area of leadership theory can play a bigger role in advocating for the faster promotion of women in management.

### 2.2.2. Secondary Research Question 2: *What actions and/or strategies have been implemented by Black women leaders themselves to accelerate their progression to senior and executive positions, and what is the effectiveness of these actions and/or strategies?*

#### 2.2.2.1. Overcoming the lack of career pathing and growth as personal barriers to accelerating the advancement of Black professionals

Research by Nzukuma and Bussin (2011) suggest that despite the perception that Black professionals move jobs frequently for financial gain, that African Black senior managers are motivated by the organisation's ability to meet their career goals and job satisfaction. If career pathing is absent, Back professionals consider moving as they are actively considering their future. Black professionals cite the absence of talent management, career paths, growth opportunities, succession planning, and coaching and mentoring as the reasons that impact their decisions to leave their employers (Booysen, 2007a). Although the previously mentioned factors fall within the corporation's remit, they do have a significant impact on the employee's personal focus which is career growth and job satisfaction.

#### 2.2.2.2. Addressing the shortcomings in education and career experience as personal barriers to accelerating the advancement of Black professionals

Some literature suggests personal barriers such as education (Mans-Kemp & Viviers, 2015) and “tokenism” on boards as reasons for the slow ascension and limited diversity in the top echelons of business (Mans-Kemp & Viviers, 2015). Nzukuma and Bussin (2011) go as far as stating that African Black senior managers need to be aware of their shortcoming and strengths and that they should align their careers goals accordingly. The latter recommendation implies that African Black senior managers might not be sufficiently qualified or experienced for the positions they are interested in and that they should not aim high nor aim for “too much too soon”. The premise applies to all candidates regardless of their race. The challenge is the negative association with regards to African Back professionals as being underqualified for top positions which is part of the self-limiting beliefs impacting the advancement of Black women to leadership roles. The recommendation by Nzukuma and Bussin (2011) is impractical given the power and influence of the corporations and power imbalance between the employers and its systems, policies, and financial position and that of the employee for the employee to be able to adequately motivate and promote their suitability for senior roles.

### 2.2.3. Secondary Research Question 3: *What company initiatives and solutions are effective in helping Black women leaders to occupy senior and executive positions?*

#### 2.2.3.1. The need to overcome systemic racism and discrimination in companies as hindrances to the acceleration of Black women to the top

Recent research (Booysen, 2007a; Steyn & Jackson, 2014) underscores the persistent existence of deep-seated discrimination within corporate environments. When there is a lack of transparency and collaboration regarding Employment Equity (EE) initiatives, it fosters a perception that top management's commitment is more verbal than practical. This results in a limited buy-in and dedication to genuine transformation or its acceleration, often reducing it to a mere compliance checkbox rather than a bona fide business imperative (Booysen, 2007a, 2007b; Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011; Steyn & Jackson, 2014).

#### 2.2.3.2. Addressing the preservation of executive power, influence, and remuneration with White male executives

The advancement of women, particularly Black women, into senior corporate positions encounters challenges due to inadequate coordination and support from upper management. The prevailing corporate culture, heavily influenced by Western male norms, adheres to a conventional hierarchy where the established male paradigm is considered the norm. This creates difficulties for women, particularly those of Black ethnicity, as they confront judgment and a lack of acceptance within organisational cultures. This resistance hinders their upward mobility, ensuring that top positions remain predominantly occupied by White male executives. This observation aligns with existing research emphasising the hindrance posed by the preservation of a male-centric culture to achieving diversity in leadership roles.

## 2.3 Identification of Research Gaps for identified themes

## Table 1

*Research gaps for identified research themes*

| Theme | No. of Articles | References | Research Gap |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Slow progress regarding transformation/employment equity** | 5 | (Albertyn & Goldblatt, 1998)<br>(April et al., 2007)<br>(Booysen, 2007a, 2007b)<br>(Smith & Nkomo, 2022) | • The articles are similar in that they all identify the slow progress of Black professional and/or Black women but only one article delves into what matters to corporations and how that can be considered as an incentive for speedier transformation.<br>• Booysen (2007) fails to make the link between financial performance and having more Black women directors on boards. There is a major research gap w.r.t demonstrating the link between financial performance and accelerating the path of women to top leadership positions.<br>• Smith and Nkomo (2022) indicates that 20 years after their first research article on the topic on representation of women professionals in the corporate world, that not much has changed two decades later. The articles provides the same advice and highlights the urgency of having more women in the corporate world – 20-year after *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity* |
| **Regulation as a driver for the accelerated advancement of Black women leaders** | 6 | (April et al., 2007; Booysen, 2007a; Lee, 2016; Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011; Steyn & Jackson, 2014) | • All the mentioned articles note the ineffectiveness of the workplace transformation legislation with several briefly touching on the internal company reasons related to little coordination, lack of top management buy-in, etc. in accelerating women to top positions.<br>• There are no insights shared regarding government's view of why the legislation is not having the desired effect on the pace and scale of having more Black women leaders in top leadership |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | positions which points to a research gap and opportunity. |
| **Organisational barriers to accelerating the advancement of Black women** | 3 | (Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011)<br>(Selby & Sutherland, 2006)<br>(Booysen, 2007a) | • There is a plethora of research opportunities in this field. There are opportunities to home in on specific topics or specific barriers e.g., whether networking can fast-track advancement, the role of sponsorship in improving visibility of Black women leaders to executive management, etc. The potential research projects can address very specific angles which makes sense given the complexity of organisational barriers. |
| **Personal barriers to accelerating the advancement of Black professionals** | 3 | (Booysen, 2007a, 2007b)<br>(Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011) | • An area to research is why corporations seems to fall short on their People Management Strategy as it relates to them tackling the lack of career pathing, limited development, and training, and limited or no mentorship to Black women leaders given the importance of having diverse talent to ensure the competitiveness and sustainability of their corporations. |
| **Environmental barriers to accelerating the advancement of Black women to top roles.** | 3 | (Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011)<br>(April, Dreyer, & Blass, 2007)<br>(Jogulu & Wood, 2006) | • These articles focus heavily on masculine and unhelpful and traditional culture but offer few solutions on what a constructive culture should look like. This is an opportunity for research regarding effective organisational cultures that can create an accelerated path for eligible Black women leaders. |
| **Executive power, influence and remuneration remain with the traditional White male executives.** | 2 | (Lee, 2016)<br>(Selby & Sutherland, 2006) | • The case for culture change and patriarchy to create more promotion opportunities for Black women leaders.<br>• An opportunity exists to explore the strategic drivers that will make White male top management relinquish or share their power and buy in to transformation. |
| **Changing leadership theory and its impact on the accelerated advancement of women in business** | 1 | (Jogulu & Wood, 2006) | • The research indicates that progress has been made regarding more contemporary leadership theories like the transformational leadership style which aligns more with the leadership style and |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | characteristics of women leaders, and that these styles have helped profile the value women leaders bring. There is an opportunity to show if and how more significant progress can be made through leadership theory to help with the accelerated advancement of women in top leadership positions. |

## 2.4 Theoretical Framework for this Study

The theoretical framework for this study drew upon three distinct yet interrelated theoretical perspectives to analyse interview data: Intersectionality Theory, Organisational Leadership Theories, and Marxist Feminist Theory. This theoretical triangulation aimed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the factors influencing the acceleration of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study employs a comprehensive approach, drawing upon three interconnected theoretical perspectives: Intersectionality Theory, Organisational Leadership Theories, and Marxist Feminist Theory. This triangulation aimed to delve deeply into the complex dynamics influencing the acceleration of Black women leaders in the corporate landscape of South Africa.

### Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory suggests that focusing solely on a single dimension of inequality is restrictive, emphasising the necessity of simultaneously considering (dis)advantages across multiple axes (Tinner et al., 2023) . Pioneer of intersectionality theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw posited that the theory serves as a foundational lens in understanding the intricate interplay of social categories such as race, gender, and

class and that individuals' experiences are shaped by the intersection of multiple identities (Coastan, 2019).

Within the scope of this study, Intersectionality Theory is instrumental in deciphering the leadership experiences of Black women in corporate South Africa. By examining the unique intersectionality of being both Black and a woman, the study seeks to unravel the interconnected social factors contributing to their advancement or posing challenges in the corporate realm.

**Organisational Leadership Theories**

Organisational Leadership Theories encompassing models like transformational and servant leadership, provide a framework for discerning effective leadership styles and qualities conducive to career advancement.

Within the nuanced organisational context of South Africa, this perspective was applied to scrutinise interview data. The goal was to identify leadership behaviours that have proven particularly efficacious for Black women in their career trajectories. By focusing on various leadership styles, the study aims to uncover elements fostering the acceleration of Black women leaders in corporate settings.

**Marxist Feminist Theory**

The main aim of feminist theory is to disturb power relations and to best understand and improve women’s lives and that of the world (Ferguson, 2017).

According to Lorber (2010) the goal of feminism is equality between women and men with the first-wave feminists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fighting for rights that women were denied like the right to vote, to get credit, to own assets, to work and to get an education among others.

Marxist feminism is based on the ideology that gender inequality emanates from the material elements and economic structure of daily life (Lorber, 2010). The relevance of Marxist feminist theory thus lies in its understanding of the exploitation of women within the capitalist system. Marxist feminist theorists argue that the profit-driven system of capitalism perpetuates the subordination and mistreatment of women and that the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of a privileged class reinforces gender inequality and prevents collective action (Carbin, 2021).This theoretical framework is apt given the very unequal distribution of power and influence between Black women and White men, as well as the economic disparity that exists in corporations and in society.

The integration of these diverse theoretical perspectives into the research design aims to yield a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors shaping the advancement of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa. This theoretical triangulation acknowledges the complexity of the research topic, ensuring a robust foundation for interpreting the research findings.

### 2.5 The Theoretical Framework and Propositions of the research project

The literature review in the previous section of this study indicated that the research topic, *Accelerating the Advancement of Black Women Leaders in Corporate South*

*Africa* is an intricate research problem with many interrelated sub-problems and aspects to it. It will be near impossible to investigate the entire breadth and depth of the research topic due to its complexity and significance. For this reason, the literature review and theoretical framework provide a helpful mandate by delineating the study to the various sub-themes discussed in previous sections.

### 2.5.1 **Theoretical underpinnings and definitions/subthemes**

#### **2.5.1.1 The "double negative" of race and gender discrimination that hamper the rapid advancement of Black women to leadership**

Ransford's Multiple Jeopardy-Multiple Advantage supposition assumes that people in the lowest positions who occupy two or more social categories, for example being female and Black, are subject to the most disadvantage in comparison to the persons who are in the highest social categories like for instance White men (Ransford, 1980). According to Ransford's Propositions Black women occupy lesser economic capacity and rewards in comparison to the privilege and power of White men (Ransford, 1980).

King (1988) elaborates on this multiple jeopardy supposition and evolves Ranford's initial concept by stating that the disadvantage of gender and race are often worsened or compounded so that Black women experience greater detriment due to the combination of their race, gender, and socio-economic status.

Instead of focusing on the broader definition of racism or race discrimination, it makes sense given the context of this research study to explore definitions that focus on the workplace. Racial discrimination is an ongoing labour market disadvantage for racial and ethnic minority groups (Hirsh & Lyons, 2010) and the intentional misjudgment of

the abilities and skills of employees (Phomphakdy & Kleiber, 1999). Similarly, gender discrimination treats workers unfavourably due to their gender resulting in pay disparity, unequal practices related to hiring and promotion, sexual harassment in the workplace and the undervaluing of the work that women do (Reskin & Roos, 1990).

The point regarding misjudgments, stereotypes and bias raised in the definition of both gender and race discrimination are the “double negative” of race and gender that negatively impact the accelerated advancement of Black women leaders to top management in major corporations in South Africa.

#### 2.5.1.2 **The preservation of traditional enclaves of power that hamper the accelerated advancement of Black women to top leadership**

Literature reviewed in the previous sections imply that although company policies, strategies and government regulation exist to facilitate more equitable female representation in management, the progress has been slow (Booysen, 2007) and that this reluctance can be attributed to longstanding enclaves of White male privilege and dominance (Lee, 2016). These enclaves have been preserved through various systemic bias and prejudice that are rooted in patriarchy and racial injustice that include male-dominant stereotypes and the upholding of Western organisational cultures.

#### 2.5.1.3 Male-dominant stereotypes of men as better leaders than women

A notion that preserves the traditional enclave is the idea held by both women and men that women are ideal followers and not ideal leaders (Braun, Stegmann, Bark, Junker, & Van Dick, 2017). The analysis by Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari (2011)

identified that stereotypes of leaders are that they are more agentic than communal and more masculine than feminine and that leaders are more like men than women.

Contemporary leadership literature recognises that leadership styles that are deemed effective are the ones that are associated with the characteristics that women personify, and that this area of leadership theory can be instrumental in advocating for the suitability of women for leadership positions (Jogulu & Wood, 2006).

#### 2.5.1.4 Competitive Western Organisational Cultures

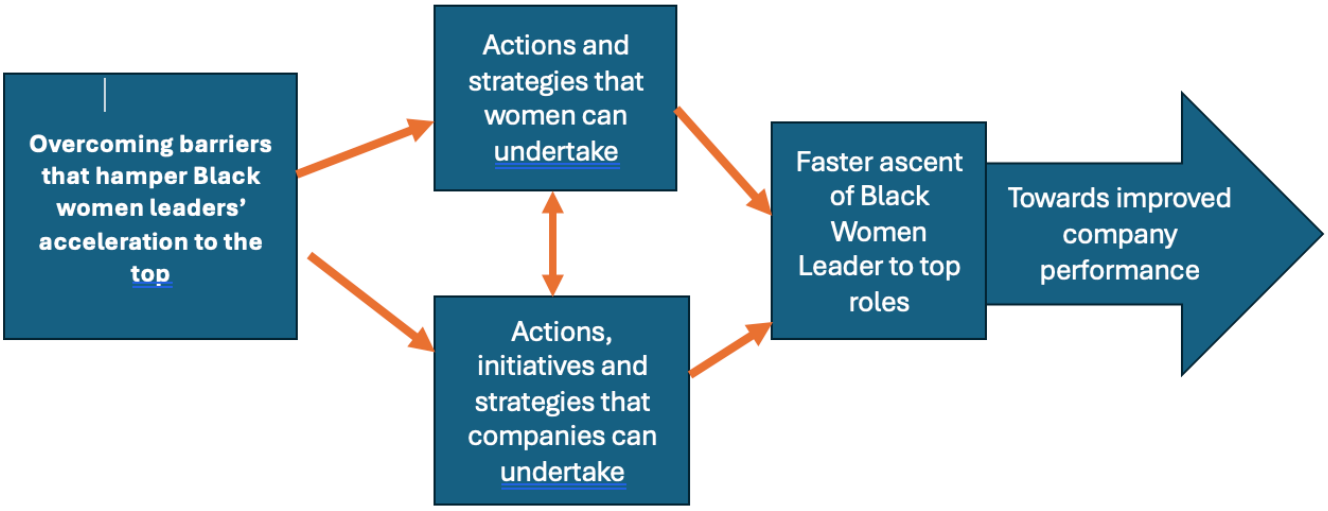
Prime (1999) states that the management style in South Africa is authoritarian, autocratic and hierarchical whilst being competitive and individualistic which is incongruent with a culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing that are required for teams to progress and grow (Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011). Nzukuma and Bussin (2011) are of the view that most South African companies operate using Western cultural norms and have been historically marginalised by being excluded from decision making and economic life.

Phomphakdy and Kleiber (1999) state that companies' top leadership should acknowledge that discrimination exists and that a zero-tolerance policy against discrimination must be enforced. They are also of the view that a top-down strategy that is led by the board and management to workers is critical in bringing about the cultural change required to eradicate workplace discrimination (Phomphakdy & Kleiber, 1999). Creating a fair and inclusive organisational environment will facilitate a more level playing field which will provide an increase in the likelihood of Black women being promoted faster alongside their white male counterparts and at the same pace.

The conceptual framework that was developed by the researcher as illustrated in Figure 1, depicts the relationship between the identified variables. It visually demonstrates the relationship between the actions that Black women leaders can take to fast-track their ascent to more senior roles, and the initiatives and strategies organisations can take to bring about a speedier ascent to the top and how the factors that are hamstringing the Black women leaders can be overcome by implementing the actions by these organisations and the Black women leaders themselves. The diagram also demonstrates that these solutions or strategies that Black women leaders and organisations implement, have the potential to lead to women moving to the tip much faster than before, which leads to a more representative organization and which in turn leads to an organisation with increased performance. The diagram also indicates that how these two phenomena, the action taken by the organisation, and action by the participants can lead to overcoming the barriers that slow down women's rise to the top and how a faster ascent to the top by these women can lead to increased company performance. The assumption is made that if these two deep systemic factors can be addressed and limited, then women will be able to ascent to top leadership positions at a faster rate.

Figure 1

*Conceptual framework developed by researcher*




## 2.6 Propositions

The following Propositions have emerged in this research study.

Proposition 1: *A stronger link between the company performance and diversity will be a catalyst for organisations to accelerate the appointment of top Black women talent.*

The first Proposition posits that establishing a stronger link between company performance and diversity will serve as a catalyst for organisations to expedite the appointment of top Black women talent. By recognising the positive impact of diverse perspectives and experiences on overall organisational performance, companies may be motivated to actively seek and promote Black women into leadership roles. This Proposition suggests that when the business case for diversity becomes more

compelling, organisations will prioritise the advancement of Black women, leading to increased representation at the top.

*Proposition 2: The acceleration of Black women to top positions in companies will take place if deep systemic prejudice and racism is addressed and eradicated.*

While there has been a rise in women's engagement in the workforce over the last three decades, primarily attributed to growing economic prospects and legislation promoting equal employment opportunities, women continue to face various forms of discrimination in the professional environment (Botha, 2017). The second Proposition asserts that the acceleration of Black women to top positions in companies is contingent upon addressing deep systemic prejudice and racism. It acknowledges the existence of structural and institutional biases that hinder the progression of Black women within corporate environments. By actively confronting and dismantling these barriers, organisations can create a more equitable and inclusive workplace, enabling Black women to overcome the systemic challenges they face.

*Proposition 3: Linking the appointment of Black women to leader performance and pay, will increase the pace at which Black women are appointed to leadership positions.*

The third Proposition suggests that linking the appointment of Black women to leader performance and pay will have a positive impact on the pace at which they are appointed to leadership positions. This Proposition posits that tying leadership performance and compensation to hiring leaders or supervisors, to the appointment of Black women will incentivise organisations to proactively identify, develop, and promote talented Black women.

*Proposition 4: Sponsorship and mentorship can play a positive role in helping women to move up the corporate ladder faster.*

The fourth Proposition centres on the role of sponsorship and mentorship in the career advancement of women, particularly Black women in corporate South Africa. It Propositions that when women have access to sponsors and mentors who can provide guidance, advocacy, and exposure to strategic opportunities, their ascent up the corporate ladder is accelerated. This is supported by the discussion that mentorship can bolster confidence, help overcome imposter syndrome, and provide a supportive environment, while sponsorship can actively open doors to new opportunities and advocate for the mentee's advancement. The Proposition is grounded in the idea that these relationships can help women navigate the complexities of corporate politics, gain valuable insights, and develop the necessary skills to take on leadership roles.

*Proposition 5: Career pathing and succession planning are essential organisational practices to retain Black women leaders and to develop a steady flow of women to senior and top leadership positions.*

The fifth Proposition suggests that career pathing and succession planning are critical organisational practices for retaining Black women leaders and ensuring a consistent pipeline of women ready to step into senior and top leadership roles. It posits that when organisations invest in the career development of Black women through clear career pathways and intentional succession planning, they not only retain talent but also prepare these individuals for future leadership positions. This approach can mitigate the impact of systemic barriers to advancement by providing Black women with a clear trajectory and the support needed to progress in their careers. It also emphasises the importance of

organisational commitment to the growth and development of Black women, which can lead to a more diverse leadership team over time.

*Proposition 6: A diverse, inclusive, and supportive organisational culture enables Black women leaders to thrive and grow within the organisation.*

The sixth Proposition contends that a diverse, inclusive, and supportive organizational culture is fundamental to the success and growth of Black women leaders within an organisation. It argues that when companies foster an environment where differences are valued, and all employees feel welcomed and respected, Black women leaders are more likely to thrive. This inclusive culture should extend beyond mere representation to ensure that Black women are not only present but also have their voices heard, their contributions recognised, and their professional needs met. Concrete steps such as providing infrastructure to support women in the workplace, implementing diversity targets, and creating programmes for women returning from maternity leave can cultivate this culture. The Proposition underscores the idea that an environment that actively supports Black women's leadership will lead to their increased presence and effectiveness in top corporate roles.

# CHAPTER 3 - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Research Design

In delving into the intricacies of accelerating the advancement of Black women leaders to top positions in corporate South Africa, a qualitative research design was adopted. According to Busetto et al. (2020), qualitative research is distinguished by its adaptability, openness, and responsiveness to the surrounding context. The qualitative research approach was chosen to glean insights directly from the lived experiences of Black women leaders, recognising the nuanced nature of their journeys. Interviews offer comprehensive insights into participants' perspectives and experiences regarding a specific subject matter (Turner, 2010). The study leveraged qualitative methods, specifically several semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Numerous qualitative researchers view the semi-structured interview as a tool that allows them to maintain a sense of direction in their studies while also being adaptable and flexible in posing questions to interviewees (Ruslin et al., 2022). It is worth noting that the flexibility and adaptability in a semi-structured interview are different from the open-ended nature of an unstructured interview, as the former maintains a controlled and guided direction argues (Ruslin et al., 2022). This was particularly helpful during the data collection process as the researcher could ask follow-up questions during the interview, could ask participants to elaborate in their answers and could also go back to a comment made.

The theoretical framework that was employed in this study, drew upon three interconnected theoretical perspectives: Intersectionality Theory, Organisational

Leadership Theories, and Marxist Feminist Theory. The objective was to thoroughly explore the intricate dynamics that influenced the acceleration of Black women leaders within the corporate landscape of South Africa.

The researcher adopted a methodological triangulation by integrating these diverse theoretical perspectives into the research design. This approach aimed to provide a detailed examination of the multifaceted factors that played a role in shaping the advancement of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa. Through this theoretical triangulation, the study recognised and addressed the complexity inherent in the issues under investigation, establishing a strong foundation for interpreting the research findings and contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on gender, race, and leadership within organisational contexts. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive and well-informed response to the main research question and the accompanying secondary research inquiries.

## 3.2 Data Collection Methods

The semi-structured interview is often seen by qualitative researchers as a valuable tool that allows them to maintain a structured approach to their studies while also offering flexibility to adapt their questions based on the responses of their interviewees (Ruslin et al., 2022).

Communication with potential participants occurred via a phone call or via WhatsApp request, with a detailed explanation of the study's focus on accelerating the advancement of Black women leaders. The semi-structured interviews, either in-

person, via Zoom, or Microsoft Teams, were outlined to last between 30 to 45 minutes, assuring anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Interviews, recorded live and transcribed with participants' consent using the Otter transcribing app, were scheduled, and conducted, with each participant assigned a unique code (P01 to P08) to safeguard data integrity.

## 3.3 Population and sample

### 3.3.1 Population

The researcher, drawing from her personal and professional network, identified nine Black women who met specific participation selection criteria. Participants were required to self-identify as women and as Black women, adhering to the definition provided by the Employment Equity Act of South Africa. Additionally, they had to hold positions in the c-suite or be senior leaders reporting directly to the CEO, or to the CEO's direct reports, or be serving as the CEO, or function as board directors. Although age and career experiences were not sampling criteria, the participants were between the ages of 43 and 51 years of age, had pursued professional careers for more than 20 years and were senior managers and executives for 10 to 20 years.

Out of the nine women approached, eight agreed to participate, with one participant referral not responding to the invitation. Consent letters were provided to all participants, and the research questionnaire was shared in advance to allow for thoughtful consideration of the topics and questions.

### 3.3.2 Sample and sampling methods

The selection of participants for this study was facilitated through purposive sampling. The researcher set out to interview a sample of six to eight participants. In academic research, it is uncommon to encounter studies comprising over twenty interviews, with the prevalent range being eight to seventeen interviews (Galvin, 2015) and the minimum observed sample size in reviewed literature was two participants (Galvin, 2015). For this research study, the researcher made a deliberate choice to engage with a sample size ranging from six to eight participants and successfully interviewed eight participants.

Focusing on executives at the c-suite and senior levels, encompassing individuals holding positions such as CEOs, CFOs, COOs, and group executives, the study delved into their encounters spanning diverse industries like financial services, professional consulting, technology, government entities, and mining.

Al participants, located in Cape Town and Johannesburg within South Africa, were intentionally chosen from the researcher's professional and personal connections. Purposeful sampling guaranteed a diverse representation across different leadership roles.

Interestingly, despite conducting individual interviews with all eight participants, saturation point—a stage where no further pertinent information emerges even with additional interviews—was reached around the interview with Participant 05. As per (Galvin, 2015), saturation, in the context of this literature, signifies the juncture at which

no new and relevant information is forthcoming, even with an expansion in the number of interviews.

## 3.4 Research instrument

The research instrument selected for this study was the semi-structured qualitative interview. The semi-structured interview, in contrast, offers flexibility by permitting the emergence of new questions based on the interviewees' responses, and it adopts a relatively informal style, fostering a face-to-face conversational discussion between the interviewer and interviewee(s) rather than following a set of formal pre-determined questions (Ruslin et al., 2022). This approach allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, offering a nuanced understanding of complex phenomena. The interview guide was developed to encourage open-ended responses, providing flexibility for participants to express their experiences and opinions freely.

The interview guide (See Annexure – C) was crafted to elicit detailed responses, incorporating open-ended questions that align with the research questions, theoretical framework, and gaps identified in the literature. Probing questions were strategically included to delve deeper into participants' narratives and experiences.

Probing questions were designed to uncover rich and detailed information, facilitating a thorough exploration of the research topics. This approach ensured that the data collected was comprehensive and aligned with the study's objectives.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for adaptability during the data collection process. This flexibility ensured that the interview structure could be

adjusted based on emerging themes, promoting a dynamic and responsive approach to understanding participants' perspectives.

The advantages of employing semi-structured qualitative interviews included the depth of insights obtained and the flexibility in data collection. However, limitations such as potential interviewer bias and resource-intensive nature were acknowledged.

The choice of using only semi-structured qualitative interviews was justified by the need for a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives. This approach aligned with the research questions, theoretical framework, and the nature of the studied phenomena. The flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed for a nuanced understanding of complex issues, enhancing the validity and richness of the study's findings.

### 3.5 Interviews

An interview schedule was developed which was modelled on answering the main research question and the three secondary research questions. Conducted on a 1:1 basis, the semi-structured interviews allowed participants the space to articulate their experiences. The researcher adopted a flexible approach, providing ample time for responses and probing for deeper insights when necessary.

### 3.6 Data Analysis and Interpretation

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted. According to Islam and Aldaihani (2022), this analysis method is a qualitative research method that involves identifying, analysing, and reporting recurring patterns or themes within a dataset. It aims to

understand shared thoughts, experiences, or behaviours across the data set (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). This method was fitting as an examination by Bowman et al. (2023) revealed that thematic analysis is frequently employed for the analysis of interview data, serving as a means to derive design insights.

The thematic data process for this study, involved systematically identifying patterns, themes, and insights directly from the raw participant transcripts, without the application of predetermined categories. As previously discussed, the researcher recorded and transcribed the interviews by using the Otter application that utilises artificial intelligence and machine learning to transcribe audio recordings into written word.

Initially, the researcher familiarised themselves with the interview transcripts and other relevant data, gaining an overall understanding of the content. Following this, codes were generated to capture key concepts or ideas emerging from the data. The coding process was iterative, with codes refined and expanded as new patterns and themes became apparent. Several of the themes identified per participant were similar to the themes identified by fellow participants. See Annexure D which provides the detailed inductive thematic analysis document which provides the detailed sub-themes and themes. The original transcript was removed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

After coding the data, the next step involved organising the codes into potential themes. This process required a careful consideration of the relationships between

codes and the broader context of the research questions. Themes were developed based on the shared meaning and relevance of coded segments.

Once the themes were established, the researcher reviewed and refined them to ensure coherence and consistency. The final step involved defining and naming each theme, providing a clear and concise representation of the patterns identified in the data.

Throughout the inductive thematic analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive and transparent approach, documenting decisions made during the coding and theme development process. This method facilitated a robust and rigorous exploration of the data, allowing for the emergence of insights directly from participants' experiences and perspectives. The entire coding and analysis process was manually implemented. The manual coding and analysis process led to the identification of sub-categories and the emergence of dominant themes. Triangulation against themes in the literature review further validated the accuracy, credibility, and fairness of the findings.

In the subsequent findings section, the identified themes were thoroughly discussed, offering insights into the main research question, and addressing the nuances of the three secondary research questions. The meticulous application of methodological rigour aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Black women leaders and strategies to expedite their advancement to the top position in corporate South Africa.

### 3.7 Assumptions

In this research project, several key assumptions underlie the research study's design and implementation. These assumptions were critical to framing the research questions and interpreting the research results.

The study assumed that Black women leaders in corporate South Africa face similar challenges and barriers regardless of their specific industry or functional area for example human resources, strategy or engineering. This assumption was based on existing literature that highlights systemic racism and gender discrimination as pervasive across different sectors (Jones et al., 2021; Smith & Taylor, 2022; Williams et al., 2023).

A second assumption is that participants were willing to openly share their experiences and perceptions regarding career advancement and barriers and what helped them or needed to be done to help them move up the corporate ladder quicker. This was crucial for gathering authentic data, though it may have been influenced by factors such as trust in the researcher and perceived confidentiality (Johnson & Rowe, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2023).

The research assumed that organisational culture significantly impacts the career progression of Black women leaders and their career progression. It posited that inclusive and supportive workplace environments are more conducive to the advancement of these women. This was supported by studies showing the correlation between inclusive practices and career success for minority groups (Allen & Lewis, 2021; Clark & Peterson, 2022; Thompson & Hall, 2023).

### 3.8 Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations were paramount in conducting research that involved the sharing of very personal experiences of the participants. In this research project the ethical conduct of the researcher as well as trustworthiness of the interview process were expected from the participants especially given that sensitive issues such as career and personal development were explored.

It was essential that all participants provided informed consent, that they understood the nature of the research, its aims, and how their data would be used as well as how the researcher would adhere to South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act (Government, 2013) which governs the law of data protection and privacy. Ensuring informed consent protects the autonomy of participants and adheres to ethical research standards (Bryman et al., 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Saunders et al., 2022).

Maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of participants were crucial to protect their identities and personal information. Explaining this when requesting them to participate was essential enabling them to be free with the information and experiences they shared. This is particularly important in studies involving workplace dynamics and potential discrimination, where participants may fear retribution or stigmatisation (Kaiser, 2022; Punch, 2021; Tracy, 2022).

The research was designed to avoid causing psychological or emotional harm to the participants. This includes being sensitive to the issues discussed and providing support resources if discussions become distressing (Flick, 2022; Hammersley &

Traianou, 2021; Silverman, 2023). The participants could opt out prior to the research and also at any point during or after the interview. This was also communicated to them verbally and contained in the interview consent letter.

### 3.9 Delimitations

This research was confined to Black women leaders in corporate organisations within South Africa although one executive was employed at a state-owned enterprise. The findings and conclusions drawn from this study may not be applicable to Black women in corporate environments in other countries, due to differing socio-economic and cultural contexts (Robinson & Smith, 2021; White, 2022; Young et al., 2023).

The study specifically targeted Black women in corporate settings, excluding those in non-corporate roles such as entrepreneurship as the focus of the study was corporate South Africa. This delimitation helped to focus on the unique challenges faced within corporate hierarchies (Adams et al., 2022; Brown & Kelly, 2023; Clarke, 2021).

Only Black women leaders who have been in corporate employment for a minimum of ten years were included in the study. This criterion ensured that participants had sufficient experience to provide insightful data on career advancement and barriers (Evans, 2022 ; Green & Taylor, 2021; Miller & Roberts, 2023).

# CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

## 4.1 Introduction

This research study delved into the nuanced landscape of the slow ascent of Black women's leadership to top positions in corporate South Africa, focusing on factors influencing their advancement and the strategies employed by both individuals and companies that can help with the acceleration to senior and executive positions. The findings are framed around the three secondary research questions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced and the pathways towards a more accelerated path to the top and a more inclusive corporate environment.

## 4.2 Findings

### 4.2.1 Secondary Research Question 1: What are the factors contributing to the slow advancement of Black women leaders to senior and top positions in corporate South Africa?

#### 4.2.1.1 Limited to no representation of Black Women in senior leadership

Limited representation in senior management and c-suite positions is a prevalent concern, revealing a significant gap between workforce demographics and leadership composition. The women participants emphasise the need for Black women to surpass expectations, forge powerful networks, and boldly showcase their accomplishments.

*“You must outperform; you have to find answers. You have to push yourself, build networks, within and outside the organisation. And make sure that people know what you're doing and why you're great.”*

The fashion industry's male-dominated leadership is held up as an example by one of the participants. The participant notes that despite the fashion industry having a substantial female workforce, it exemplifies industry-specific challenges. This misalignment is echoed in consumer decision-making being predominantly by women, yet the senior leadership not reflecting this demographic.

Slow progress in increasing the percentage of Black women in leadership roles is evident, with telecom and financial services companies cited as positive examples. Overcoming the "sticky middle" or middle management level barrier where people Black women often remain and are not promoted barrier depth of experience and increased opportunities for advancement.

The participants were all the view that diversity is often seen as a compliance issue rather than a strategic commitment, with diversity initiatives perceived as threats by decision-makers. The importance of rebranding diversity to be commercially compelling is emphasised to shift this perspective.

The impact of diversity-related key performance indicators (KPIs) on hiring practices, reluctance to take risks on underrepresented individuals, and the potential for tokenism are highlighted by the participants. This underscores the need for a balanced approach to hiring, avoiding pitfalls associated with diversity-focused decisions.

The role of organisational culture in providing career paths, the significance of sponsorship for career advancement, and the challenge of cultivating sponsors when

individuals are not present are critical factors influencing Black women's career trajectories.

#### 4.2.1.2 Cultural Isolation and Political Dynamics

Cultural isolation is a recurring theme during the interviews, highlighting the challenge Black women leaders face as often the only representation in senior positions. This isolation extends to a lack of supportive networks for professional advice and guidance. Navigating internal political games, especially in state-owned entities, adds an additional layer of complexity.

The positive impact of mentorship on confidence and overcoming imposter syndrome is emphasised, urging the need for therapy, and coaching for mental wellness. Deliberate recruitment efforts and a focus on diversity are seen as crucial for organisational success.

*“In the corporate sector, as a black woman professional, you cannot really relate to your peers and seniors as you are often the only black leader in the top rungs. No one looks like you, and you can’t relate culturally. You don’t have anyone who you can confide in, ask for professional advice and guidance.”*

#### 4.2.1.3 Historical and Socio-economic Barriers

Long-term impacts of South Africa's segregated history on Black women's leadership representation and socio-economic challenges are significant barriers. The lack of organisational support and awareness of the unconscious bias of white colleagues and male colleagues further hinders progress.

The participants noted that stereotypes affecting the credibility of Black women leaders are rooted in the perception that men hold knowledge, underscoring the need for dismantling such biases. All the participants cite the struggles to balance career advancement with family responsibilities. The lack of facilities for new mothers, are evident challenges that several women raised.

*"Organisations should establish appropriate company policies and programmes. For instance, the company I work for has implemented Back to Work programmes for new mothers, hosts women-led hackathons, incorporates KPIs aligned with diversity targets, and ensures diversity and inclusion are integral components of the company's culture."*

#### 4.2.1.4 Representation and Progress

Perceptions of inadequate representation of Black women in senior leadership, compounded by societal factors, contribute to slow progress according to these women. Overcoming superficial leadership opportunities and tokenism, along with managing work-life balance, emerged as complex challenges during the interviews.

The critical role of mentorship and sponsorship, the need for organisational transparency, and accountability for diversity efforts are emphasised by 100% of the participants. Personal growth strategies, including intentional communication about their career ambitions, they believe play a pivotal role in career advancement.

*"My recent personal challenge has centred around grappling with impostor syndrome, particularly as I assume more senior roles. I've always acknowledged the necessity to perform on an international stage, to exhibit leadership, and to engage in tasks that I haven't had the privilege of experiencing before."*

#### 4.2.1.5 Limited transparency and information access

The participants were unanimous in their call for an organisational culture that fosters transparency, provide women with information access, and allow visibility through high-profile projects is crucial. The participants raised that recognising that women's needs differ and advocating for financial gain to address the pay gap are essential for fostering an inclusive environment.

The participants indicated that the slow progress in gender equality is linked to societal norms, and the lack of acknowledgment of women's contributions in corporate culture is evident. Women's initiatives and forums that are started by these women are seen as vital for supporting women's advancement.

"*Opportunities are discussed in forums maybe when women are not adequately represented. And even when those conversations happen, it's not top of mind to push the diversity agenda, whether it be around gender or whether it be around race."*

#### 4.2.1.6 Bias and Decision-making

Biases among decision-makers, loneliness experienced by Black women, and the desire for authentic workplaces were some of the persistent challenges highlighted. The hope for generational optimism and the importance of authenticity and

representation in senior leadership underscore the ongoing struggle for cultural acceptance by these women.

The women highlighted that mentorship's effectiveness is tied to genuine care and connection, and that the desire for a work environment that respects work-life balance remains a crucial theme. Freedom to leave unsupportive work environments and the importance of organisational culture in acknowledging cultural differences were significant considerations mentioned.

*"As a woman, you have to have a sense of self-assurance and recognise your self-worth. There will be moments of vulnerability, where you seek external validation that the world may not always readily provide. The crux lies in navigating through those instances when validation is elusive. At some point in your career journey, encountering obstacles, facing friction, or experiencing setbacks becomes a necessary part of the process. Whether these challenges manifest subtly or significantly, you have to go through it to attain the credibility essential to becoming a credible senior leader."*

### 4.2.2 Secondary Research Question 2: *What actions and/or strategies have been implemented by Black women leaders themselves to accelerate their progression to senior and executive positions, and what is the effectiveness of these actions and/or strategies?*

#### 4.2.2.1 Personal Experiences and Sponsorship

The personal accounts of the participants highlighted the benefits of sponsorship and emphasised that although having mentors and sponsors that can relate to the challenges faced by these Black women leaders is helpful, that male mentors and sponsors were equally important and instrumental in supporting the participants on their career trajectory.

*"My coach not only provided a secure and non-judgemental space but also equipped me with the necessary tools to navigate the corporate world."*

#### 4.2.2.2 Collective Responsibility and Inclusivity

One of the participants raised the need for diversity to be perceived as everyone's responsibility, rather than a challenge for Black women alone. The idea of mutual support and the collective working together for the sustainability of the business and for the good of everyone, and being each other's keeper was noted.

*“How can we enhance our mutual support and ensure the continuous enhancement of each other's capacity to succeed?"*

#### 4.2.2.3 Networking and Sponsorship as personal strategies for advancement

Individuals' strategies for reaching senior positions, and particularly the indispensable role of sponsorship, were discussed during the interviews. The importance of personal branding and cultivating a professional identity in the workplace and in professional networks were recurring themes that the participants cited. The necessity of building relationships with executives and senior colleagues was stressed by the participants.

Engaging with superiors on a personal level to build rapport emerged as a strategic approach by these women.

*"Strategic career planning is paramount. Expanding your network, embracing a servant leadership approach, participating in training courses, and inspiring others are pivotal actions that have significantly contributed to my professional jou*mey."

#### 4.2.2.4 Career Strategy and Expertise Building

The participants raised the importance of building expertise and gaining diverse experience as Black women climb the corporate ladder. The strategy of becoming an expert and a credible and effective leader was highlighted as an effective approach for faster career advancement.

*"It becomes more challenging when you're just silently good because it necessitates going above and beyond to ensure that the work consistently speaks for itself."*

#### 4.2.2.5 Professional Branding and Results

Participants emphasised the importance of developing a professional brand based on the proven results of what Black women achieve. The focus on delivering results that are aligned with their superiors' expectations was noted as pivotal for the accelerated career progression of Black women.

#### 4.2.2.6 Risk-Taking and Opportunities

The willingness to take risks and seize opportunities, even when daunting, was highlighted by the participants. According to them it involves a mindset shift where opportunities are taken and where Black women leaders venture outside of their comfort zone.

*"Learn to confidently advocate for opportunities, even when others might suggest you're stepping beyond your perceived boundaries. Consider, 'If I were a white male, or if I were a man, how would I approach this situation?'"*

### 4.2.3 Secondary Research Question 3: *What company initiatives and solutions are effective in helping Black women leaders to occupy senior and executive management roles?*

#### 4.2.3.1 Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership

According to the participants, the intentional inclusion of Black women in leadership roles and challenging the perception that diversity limits options, are pivotal if the acceleration of women to the top were to be achieved. Getting companies to view diversity as a strategic advantage rather than a compliance issue can enhance operational performance and sustainability.

The participants pointed out that deliberate succession planning and the importance of managing expectations while preparing individuals for leadership roles are significant. They also emphasised that addressing inherent biases and fostering trust and value in the workplace contribute to a more inclusive corporate culture.

*“Organisations need to be a safe space where there is no judgement or discrimination because of your race and gender. Where everyone is treated equally and has the same fair chance at promotion and growth.”*

#### 4.2.3.2 Addressing Underrepresentation and Socio-economic Factors

Insights from individual interviews shed light on the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership and underscored the substantial impact of socio-economic circumstances on their career trajectory. Participants consistently highlighted the prevalence of cultural constructs, corporate barriers, and gender expectations, emphasising the added challenges stemming from resistance to divergent views within corporate structures.

The interviews revealed a consensus on the importance of targeted initiatives aimed at breaking barriers, offering mentorship, and establishing robust support networks to effectively address these challenges. Moreover, the significance of acknowledging one's privilege and actively leveraging it to uplift others emerged as a recurring theme, emphasising its crucial role in fostering a more inclusive corporate environment according to the insights shared during the individual interviews.

*"Given the historically segregated nature of South Africa, achieving true parity will be an enduring process, requiring years and years of concerted efforts. This is particularly evident when considering the socio-economic position of Black women, encompassing aspects such as their financial standing, access to education, and the influence of cultural factors."*

#### 4.2.3.3 Addressing Pipeline Challenges and Accelerating Career Advancement

In exploring the challenges faced by Black women in career advancement, participants in individual interviews consistently emphasised the concept of the "sticky middle" as a significant barrier. This term encapsulates the difficulties associated with

transitioning from middle management to senior leadership roles. Participants shed light on the complexities of this stage, emphasising the need for a profound depth of experience and increased opportunities for advancement.

The importance of sponsorship and mentorship emerged as crucial components in navigating this intricate terrain. According to a participant, reflecting on their early career, *"I was young, very shy, introverted, scared, and having a mentor helped a great deal early on in my career."* This resonates with the broader sentiment expressed during the interviews, underscoring the instrumental role mentorship plays in overcoming the challenges within the "sticky middle."

#### 4.2.3.4 Going beyond Diversity as a Compliance Issue but as a Strategic Imperative

Participants delved into the perception of diversity as a compliance issue rather than a strategic imperative. The interviews revealed a collective understanding of the need to reposition diversity efforts as commercially compelling initiatives, aligning them with the broader business agenda. This reframing, as suggested by the participants, signifies a shift from a mere compliance mindset to a strategic approach that integrates diversity seamlessly into the organisational fabric.

The sentiments expressed by a participant shed light on the prevailing discussions around opportunities within forums where women may be inadequately represented: *"Opportunities are discussed in forums maybe when women are not adequately represented. And even when those conversations happen, it's not top of mind to push the diversity agenda."*

The interviews further highlighted the necessity of elevating diversity agendas to top-of-mind status, emphasising the strategic importance of fostering an inclusive environment.

#### 4.2.3.5 Linking Diversity to Incentives and Improving Hiring Practices related to Underrepresented Groups

Acknowledging the impact of diversity-related Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on hiring practices, participants cited the need for more robust incentives. Despite this acknowledgement, there was a collective recognition of the prevailing reluctance to take risks on individuals from underrepresented groups, signalling the need to move beyond tokenism.

Within the discussions, the importance of striking a balance emerged, ensuring that diversity related KPIs lead to meaningful and inclusive hiring practices. This nuanced perspective, drawn from the individual interviews, points to a conscientious approach to diversity initiatives that goes beyond mere numerical representation.

#### 4.2.3.6 Towards a More Inclusive Organisational Culture and Sponsorship

The significance of organisational culture in shaping career paths and opportunities was a recurring theme in the individual interviews. Participants underscored the pivotal role of sponsorship, advocacy, and diversity in fostering career advancement within an inclusive culture. According to one of the participants, *"In the corporate sector, as a black woman professional you cannot really relate to your peers and seniors as you are often the only black leader in the top rungs."*

This perspective amplifies the importance of not only recognising the impact of organisational culture but also actively working towards creating an inclusive environment that transcends racial and gender disparities. Sponsorship and advocacy, as highlighted in the interviews, become essential mechanisms for breaking down these barriers and fostering a more supportive workplace culture.

### 4.3 Summary of the findings

In the research study "Accelerating the Advancement of Black women Leaders in Corporate South Africa," semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight highly qualified and experienced women occupying senior roles within their respective organisations. These women, all of whom identified as Black, held top positions in a variety of sectors, including financial services, professional consulting, technology, government entities, and mining. Among the interviewees, two were CEOs of large private companies, one was a CFO of a state-owned entity, one was a COO of a publicly listed company, one was a group executive at a publicly listed company, and the remaining participants were senior professionals reporting directly to c-suite leaders.

The findings from these interviews revealed a wealth of insights into the professional journeys of these women, the obstacles they have faced, and the strategies they have employed to navigate the corporate landscape. The interviews also shed light on the effectiveness of various organisational initiatives aimed at supporting the advancement of Black women into leadership roles:

## 4.4 Factors Contributing to the Slow Advancement of Black Women Leaders

*Limited Representation in Leadership*: Limited representation in senior management and c-suite positions is a prevalent concern, revealing a significant gap between workforce demographics and leadership composition. The women participants emphasise the need for Black women to surpass expectations, forge powerful networks, and boldly showcase their accomplishments.

*Sticky Middle Barrier*: Slow progress in increasing the percentage of Black women in leadership roles is evident, with telecom and financial services companies cited as positive examples. Overcoming the "sticky middle" or middle management level barrier where Black women often remain and are not promoted is a challenge requiring depth of experience and increased opportunities for advancement.

*Perception of Diversity as Compliance:* Diversity is often seen as a compliance issue rather than a strategic commitment, with diversity initiatives perceived as threats by decision-makers. The importance of rebranding diversity to be commercially compelling is emphasised to shift this perspective.

*Organisational Culture and Career Trajectories:* The role of organisational culture in providing career paths, the significance of sponsorship for career advancement, and the challenge of cultivating sponsors when individuals are not present are critical factors influencing Black women's career trajectories.

*Cultural Isolation and Political Dynamics*: Cultural isolation, especially in state-owned entities, adds complexity, highlighting the importance of mentorship for confidence and overcoming imposter syndrome. Deliberate recruitment efforts and a focus on diversity are seen as crucial for organisational success.

*Historical and Socio-economic Barriers*: Long-term impacts of South Africa's segregated history on Black women's leadership representation and socio-economic challenges are significant barriers. Stereotypes affecting credibility and challenges balancing career advancement with family responsibilities are notable issues.

*Limited Transparency and Information Access*: The call for an organisational culture that fosters transparency, provides Black women with information access, and allows visibility through high-profile projects is crucial. Slow progress in gender equality is linked to societal norms, and initiatives led by women are seen as vital for supporting women's advancement.

*Bias and Decision-making*: Biases among decision-makers, loneliness experienced by Black women leaders, and the desire for authentic workplaces are persistent challenges. Mentorship's effectiveness is tied to genuine care, and a supportive work environment is crucial for acknowledging cultural differences.

## 4.5 Actions and Strategies Implemented by Black Women Leaders

*Personal Experiences and Sponsorship*: The benefits of sponsorship are highlighted, with male mentors and sponsors playing an important role. Building a secure and non-judgemental space for mentees is emphasised.

*Collective Responsibility and Inclusivity*: Diversity is perceived as everyone's responsibility. Mutual support, collective working, and being each other's keeper are essential for the sustainability of businesses.

*Networking and Sponsorship as Personal Strategies*: Building relationships with executives, cultivating a professional identity, and engaging on a personal level are strategic approaches. Strategic career planning, expanding networks, and inspiring others contribute to professional journeys.

*Career Strategy and Expertise Building*: Building expertise and gaining diverse experience are crucial for climbing the corporate ladder. Silent excellence necessitates going above and beyond to consistently speak for itself.

*Professional Branding and Results*: Developing a professional brand based on proven results is pivotal for accelerated career progression. Delivering results aligned with superiors' expectations is noted as crucial.

*Risk-Taking and Opportunities*: Willingness to take risks and seize opportunities, even when daunting, involves a mindset shift. Advocating confidently for opportunities is essential.

## 4.6 Company Initiatives and Solutions Effective for Black Women Leaders

*Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership*: Intentional inclusion of Black women in leadership roles and challenging the perception that diversity limits options are pivotal. Succession planning, addressing biases, and fostering trust contribute to a more inclusive corporate culture.

*Addressing Underrepresentation and Socio-economic Factors*: Targeted initiatives, breaking barriers, providing mentorship, and acknowledging privilege are crucial. Cultural constructs, corporate barriers, and gender expectations are barriers requiring concerted efforts.

*Pipeline Challenges and Accelerating Career Advancement*: The concept of the "sticky middle" is acknowledged, emphasising the need for depth of experience and increased opportunities. Sponsorship and mentorship are pivotal in navigating this terrain.

*Beyond Diversity as a Compliance Issue*: Repositioning diversity efforts as commercially compelling initiatives is crucial. Elevating diversity agendas to top-of-mind status fosters an inclusive environment.

*Linking Diversity to Incentives and Improving Hiring Practices*: Acknowledging the impact of diversity related KPIs on hiring practices, a balanced approach is necessary to avoid tokenism. Striking a balance ensures meaningful and inclusive hiring practices.

*Inclusive Organisational Culture and Sponsorship*: Organisational culture's significance in shaping career paths and opportunities is stressed. Sponsorship, advocacy, and diversity are highlighted as essential mechanisms for breaking down barriers and fostering a more supportive workplace culture.

In summary, the findings from the interviews with these eight Black women leaders reveal significant challenges and effective strategies to accelerate progress to top positions in corporate South Africa. Limited representation, cultural dynamics, historical barriers, and biases persist, but proactive measures, collective responsibility, and strategic initiatives are paving the way for Black women's leadership advancement.

## 4.7 Limitations

This research grapples with several limitations that temper the generalisability and broad applicability of its findings. Being cognisant of these limitations is essential for leaders, companies, regulators, practitioners, and researchers intending to build upon the insights derived from the study.

The deliberate sampling strategy, drawing primarily from the researcher's professional and personal network, introduces potential bias, limiting the scope of experiences shared by Black women leaders to a specific subset of participants. This selective approach may not comprehensively capture the diversity of challenges faced by all Black women in similar leadership positions. Additionally, the concentration of participants in Cape Town and Johannesburg emphasises the need for caution when

extrapolating the findings to the broader population of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa.

Relying on self-reported data obtained through interviews is a limitation that introduces potential biases. Social desirability bias may influence participants to present responses deemed socially acceptable, while recall bias might impact the accuracy of historical accounts and experiences shared during interviews. These inherent biases pose challenges to the reliability and validity of the collected data, underscoring the need for a cautious interpretation of the findings.

The underrepresentation of certain industries in the study may limit insights into the unique challenges faced by Black women leaders in sectors not extensively covered. In conclusion, while this study sheds light on the experiences of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa and provides valuable insights and remedies, the acknowledged limitations call for a careful and context-aware interpretation of the findings. They present opportunities for future research to expand upon these insights, improving the further understanding of the challenges and strategies pertinent to the Black women leaders across diverse contexts and industries in corporate South Africa.

## 4.8 Reliability and validity

This study aimed for methodological rigor, emphasising reliability and validity. Triangulation, involving data collection from various sources like reports, legislation, and journal articles, bolstered the credibility of the study.

To enhance credibility further, active listening, observations, and seeking feedback during interviews were crucial. These measures aimed to foster open dialogue and overall study trustworthiness. The researcher recorded the interviews with the permission from the participants, transcribed the interviews through a transcription app and then analysed the transcribed data.

Relying on self-reported interview data introduces biases like social desirability and recall bias, impacting accuracy. While the thematic analysis undertaken by the researcher was rigorous, it remains subjective.

In conclusion, despite efforts to ensure reliability and validity, acknowledging limitations is vital. Potential sampling bias, reliance on self-reported data, and subjectivity in thematic analysis may affect external validity. Future research should address these concerns, employing diverse methodologies for comprehensive insights. This study contributes to understanding Black women leaders' experiences, emphasising the need for ongoing research to refine interventions in corporations.

## 4.9 Implications and recommendations

The qualitative study on the problem of the slow advancement of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa provided insightful findings. However, it is crucial to recognise the study's qualitative nature, limiting its generalisability across all Black women. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing their progression, rather than offering universal conclusions. While the findings are context-specific, the study's limitations underscore the need for further research.

The diversity of Black women leaders' experiences during their journey to the top rungs of organisations, demands an extensive study with a diverse participant pool. Specific focus areas such as mentorship, sponsorship, diversity-performance correlation, and organisational culture' warrant further in-depth exploration. Further research could unravel the effectiveness of interventions and offer practical insights for companies and policymakers.

Recommendations for further exploration include investigating the impact of mentorship and sponsorship programmes on confidence and career acceleration. Exploring the correlation between diversity at senior levels and organisational performance through case studies can provide valuable insights. Additionally, delving into reshaping organisational culture to eliminate biases and discrimination and exploring unique challenges faced by Black women in specific sectors are critical aspects of future research.

The study has been valuable as it emerged practical solutions for Black women leaders and companies. For Black women navigating corporate landscapes, actively building, and nurturing professional networks, seeking mentorship, and investing in continuous learning are pivotal. Advocating for oneself, cultivating a strong personal brand, and focusing on skill acquisition aligning with leadership roles contribute to career progression.

For companies aiming to foster diversity and inclusion, clear communication of policies, effective mentorship and sponsorship programmes, and the promotion of an inclusive organisational culture are imperative. Providing flexible work arrangements

to support work-life balance and addressing specific challenges faced by Black women leaders contribute to a supportive environment. Targeted leadership development programmes tailored for Black women ensure addressing their unique challenges and opportunities.

In conclusion, while the study sheds light on the challenges faced by Black women leaders, it serves as a solid baseline for a further exploration. Further research, focusing on specific themes and interventions, will provide nuanced insights, contributing to targeted strategies for the accelerated advancement of Black women in corporate South Africa.

## 4.10 Conclusion

In summary, this research project delves deeply into the complexities surrounding the sluggish progress of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa. The qualitative analysis has unearthed invaluable insights based on the lived experiences of eight successful and driven Black women occupying senior roles. It is essential to recognise the context-specific nature of these findings, emphasising caution in generalising to encompass all Black women. This study lays the groundwork for future research, urging a more in-depth exploration of specific themes such as mentorship, sponsorship, and the correlation between diversity, performance, and organisational culture.

The voices of these women have illuminated systemic barriers, cultural dynamics, and personal strategies, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in their professional journeys. The findings highlight the importance of

further research and interventions to improve the plight of Black women in corporate South Africa. As we conclude this research project, it is evident that these insights are not only significant for individual career navigation but are also crucial for companies aiming to cultivate more inclusive leadership landscapes. In the words of World Trade Organisation Director-General Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, *"If you have a sense of purpose that drives you, then aim high and become a leader and make room as you go".* This encapsulates the essence of the journey towards empowering Black women in corporate leadership roles.

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# ANNEXURES

## ANNEXURE A – INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW

Wits Business School
P.O. Box 98
Wits
Johannesburg
2050

[Date]

Dear Madam

**INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN MBA RESEARCH PROJECT - INTERVIEW**

My name is Shamiela Letsoalo. I am a Master in Business Administration student at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr Nomusa Mazonde and I am conducting a research study on the acceleration of Black women to top positions. The study title is: Accelerating the advancement of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa.

I am inviting you to take part in a telephonic or face-to-face interview during which time I would be grateful if you could answer a questionnaire. If you decide to take part, your participation in the interview will last about 30 to 45 minutes. The interview will take place telephonically or face-to-face, with the latter taking place at a venue of your preference if you are based in Johannesburg. I would appreciate it if you could advise if you are willing to participate, and if you are, whether you can kindly provide a slot between xx and xx between [date] and [date].

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. This data will be stored on a password protected computer for six years and will be deleted after this period. Only I will have access to the data.

The interview will be confidential and anonymous. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. With your permission, other researchers may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to take part. You can stop being in the study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not get any direct benefits if you choose to join the research study but will contribute to the body of knowledge on this very important topic. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights you would normally have if you decided

not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything. You will not be paid for being in this research study.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday life but if you find any of the questions distressing, I will gladly stop the interview and continue another time.

This research study will be written up as a research report. The report will be available on the university library website. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Shamiela

Researcher:
Shamiela Letsoalo, 2423421@students.wits.ac.za, +27 78 802 6310

## ANNEXURE B – RESEARCH PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

**RESEARCH PARTICIPATION CONSENT**
**MBA PROGRAMME 2022/2023**

**Title of Research Project: Accelerating the Advancement of Black Women leaders in Corporate South Africa**

**Name of researcher: Shamiela Letsoalo**

I, ……., agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

*(Please circle the relevant options below)*

| | |
|---|---|
| The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about. | YES NO |
| I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study. | YES NO |
| I agree that the interview may be audio recorded. | YES NO |
| I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report/ manuscript/article/book chapter/book and that these will be anonymous and not attributed to me. | YES NO |
| I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in their research report/manuscript/article/book chapter/book). | YES NO |
| I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview/focus group (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on. | YES NO |

Name of participant: ……

Signature: ……

Date: ……

Name of researcher seeking consent: Shamiela Letsoalo

Signature: ……

Date: ……

## ANNEXURE C - INTERVIEW SCHEDULE




### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

**MBA 2022/2023**
**WEEKDAY B**

### Research Title: Accelerating the Advancement of Black Women Leaders in Corporate South Africa

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in my research study (as a requirement of my Masters in Business Administration at the Wits Business School), focused on understanding the challenges and opportunities concerning Accelerating the Advancement of Black Women Leaders in Corporate South Africa. Your insights are invaluable and will contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the representation and progression of Black Women Leaders.

Interview Details:

Full Name of Participant:

Participant code:

Date and Time of Interview:

Title of Participant:

Company Name:

Please note that the information collected during this interview will remain confidential, and your identity will be protected. The research findings will be utilised solely for the purpose of my research project, potential journal articles and/or subsequent books, or interview content. Rest assured that your responses will be anonymised, and you will not be personally identifiable in

any published material or public comments. The interview will be conducted via Zoom or MS Teams or in-person and the duration will be 30-45 minutes.

Your willingness to share your experiences and perspectives is greatly appreciated. Let us now delve into the discussion to gain valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Black Women Leaders in their journey to top leadership roles.

**Interview Schedule**

1. In your perspective, what are the key factors that contribute significantly to the underrepresentation of Black Women leaders in the corporate sector of South Africa, and how have these factors impacted their career trajectories?

2. Reflecting on your personal experiences, can you share specific challenges or obstacles you've encountered as a Black Woman in the corporate sector while striving for career advancement?

3. From your viewpoint, how do mentorship or sponsorship programmes contribute to supporting the career advancement of Black Women Leaders, and can you provide examples or anecdotes that highlight their impact?

4. Are there specific policies or initiatives that you believe would effectively accelerate the advancement of Black Women Leaders in corporate South Africa, and if so, what aspects make these approaches particularly promising?

5. In your opinion, what role does organisational culture play in shaping the career progression of Black Women Leaders, and what concrete steps do you think can be taken to enhance and cultivate a more inclusive organisational culture?

6. Reflecting on your own corporate career journey, what specific actions or strategies did you personally undertake that you believe significantly contributed to your acceleration into top leadership roles as a Black woman?

7. Conversely, can you share insights into the organisational support or initiatives provided by your company that played a pivotal role in your advancement to top leadership positions in the corporate sector of South Africa?

8. Considering your journey, could you identify and prioritise the top three initiatives or actions—whether self-driven or organisational—that you found most impactful in propelling you toward top leadership roles, and elaborate on how these elements shaped your trajectory?

9. Anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for your participation.

# ANNEXURE D – THEMATIC ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

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|---|
| **Main Research Question:** ***What strategies can facilitate the acceleration of Black women leaders in corporate South Africa to senior and top management roles according to the views of experienced top women leaders?*** |
| **Secondary Research Question 1:** ***What are the factors contributing to the slow advancement of Black women leaders to senior and top positions in corporate South Africa?*** |
| **Secondary Research Question 2:** ***What actions and/or strategies have been implemented by Black women leaders themselves to accelerate their progression to senior and executive positions, and what is the effectiveness of these actions and/or strategies?*** |
| **Secondary Research Question 3:** ***What company initiatives and solutions are effective in helping Black women leaders to occupy senior and executive management roles?*** |

| PARTICIPANT | EMERGERGENT CODES | BROAD THEMES | FINAL THEMES |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Participant 1: P01** | **1. Representation of Black Women in Leadership**<br>2. **Industry-Specific Representation**<br>3. **Progress and Change in Representation**<br>4. **Pipeline and Career Advancement**<br>5. **Diversity as a Strategic Commitment**<br>6. **Incentives and Risks in Hiring**<br>7. **Organizational Culture and Sponsorship**<br>8. **Personal Experiences and Anecdotes**<br>9. **Collective Responsibility and Inclusivity**<br>10. **Talent Development and Management**<br>11. **Bias and Self-Awareness**<br>12. **Organizational Culture and Change**<br>13. **Leadership and Decision-Making**<br>14. **Engagement and Values**<br>15. **Personal Strategies for Advancement**<br>16. **Career Strategy and Expertise Building**<br>17. **Professional Branding and Results**<br>18. **Relationship Building and Networking**<br>19. **Risk-Taking and Opportunities**<br>20. **Diversity Initiatives and Organizational Change**<br>21. **Talent Pipeline and Recruitment**<br>22. **National Representation and Employment Equity**<br>-END | **Participant 1:**<br><br>1. **Representation of Black Women in Leadership**<br>- Limited representation in senior management and C-suite positions<br>- Discrepancy between workforce demographics and leadership representation<br>- Underrepresentation of women and non-white males in executive teams<br><br>2. **Industry-Specific Representation**<br>- Fashion industry as an example of male-dominated leadership despite a significant female workforce<br>- Consumer decision-making predominantly by women but not reflected in company leadership<br><br>3. **Progress and Change in Representation**<br>- Slow progress in increasing the percentage of Black women in leadership roles<br>- Examples of organizations with improved diversity in executive committees (e.g., telecom companies, Standard Bank)<br><br>4. **Pipeline and Career Advancement**<br>- Challenges in moving from middle management to senior leadership<br>- The "sticky middle" as a barrier to career progression<br>- The need for depth of experience and opportunities for advancement<br><br>5. **Diversity as a Strategic Commitment**<br>- Diversity often treated as a compliance issue rather than a strategic imperative<br>- The perception of diversity initiatives as a threat by those in decision-making positions<br>- The importance of rebranding diversity to be commercially compelling<br><br>6. **Incentives and Risks in Hiring**<br>- The impact of diversity-related KPIs on hiring practices<br>- The reluctance to take risks on individuals from underrepresented groups<br>- The potential for tokenism and the premium placed on diversity hires<br><br>7. **Organizational Culture and Sponsorship**<br>- The role of organizational culture in providing career paths and opportunities<br>- The importance of sponsorship and advocacy for career advancement<br>- The challenge of cultivating sponsors who can advocate for individuals when they are not present<br><br>8. **Personal Experiences and Anecdotes**<br>- Personal accounts of benefiting from sponsorship<br>- The gender of sponsors and their influence on career opportunities<br><br>9. **Collective Responsibility and Inclusivity**<br>- The need for diversity to be everyone's responsibility, not just a problem for black people<br>- The importance of getting white males on board with diversity initiatives<br>- The concept of being each other's keeper and supporting one another's success<br><br>10. **Talent Development and Management**<br>- The role of talent programs in developing professionals at every level<br>- The importance of nominating diverse individuals for talent programs<br>- The need for organizational talent management that includes diverse groups<br><br>11. **Bias and Self-Awareness**<br>- The importance of acknowledging and addressing personal biases<br>- The need for conversations about diversity and the benefits of inclusion<br>- The impact of self-awareness on hiring practices and team diversity<br><br>12. **Organizational Culture and Change**<br>- The influence of organizational culture on attracting and retaining diverse talent<br>- The need for facilities and policies that are inclusive of women's needs<br>- The importance of structured communication and addressing blind spots<br><br>13. **Leadership and Decision-Making**<br>- The role of leadership in challenging the status quo and promoting diversity<br>- The impact of external perspectives on internal diversity efforts<br>- The importance of deliberate efforts to promote qualified minority candidates<br><br>14. **Engagement and Values**<br>- The significance of high engagement and focusing on issues rather than individuals<br>- The use of engagement surveys to gather information and drive change<br>- The active use of organizational values in decision-making and culture building<br><br>15. **Personal Strategies for Advancement**<br>- The actions and strategies individuals undertake to reach senior positions<br>- The role of sponsorship in career advancement<br>- The personal efforts to stand out and be recognized for one's contributions<br><br>16. **Career Strategy and Expertise Building**<br>- The importance of building expertise and gaining experience<br>- The decision to focus on capability building rather than job hopping<br>- The strategy of becoming a specialist to advance in one's career<br><br>17. **Professional Branding and Results**<br>- The development of a professional brand based on proven results<br>- The significance of qualifications and working for high-quality organizations<br>- The focus on delivering results that align with the expectations of superiors<br><br>18. **Relationship Building and Networking**<br>- The necessity of building relationships with executives and senior colleagues<br>- The importance of being seen as a human being, not just a transactional figure<br>- The strategy of engaging with superiors on a personal level to build rapport<br><br>19. **Risk-Taking and Opportunities**<br>- The willingness to take risks and seize opportunities, even when they seem daunting<br>- The experience of working in different countries and standing out in the organization<br>- The mindset of "What would I do if I were a white male?" to challenge personal boundaries<br><br>20. **Diversity Initiatives and Organizational Change**<br>- The focus on diversity and inclusion within the organization<br>- The implementation of diversity KPIs that impact financial incentives<br>- The efforts to improve recruitment processes and reduce biases<br><br>21. **Talent Pipeline and Recruitment**<br>- The challenge of finding diverse talent and the strategies to overcome it<br>- The celebration of progress in diversity and the focus on building a diverse talent pipeline<br>- The requirement to justify non-diverse hiring decisions and the focus on hiring for transformation<br><br>22. **National Representation and Employment Equity**<br>- The emphasis on recruiting black professionals as part of national employment equity goals<br>- The recognition of underrepresentation of certain demographic groups in the workforce<br>- The inclusion of both African males and females in diversity efforts<br><br>Quotes:<br>- And it's, you have to outperform, you have to find answers. You know, you know, push yourself you know, also be part of your own agency and just build networks. build networks, within and without the organization. And make sure that people know what you're doing and why you great yeah.( "Strive for exceptional performance, incessantly seek solutions. Challenge yourself, engage in self-directed agency, and foster connections both within and outside the organizational framework. Communicate the essence and significance of your actions, cultivating a sphere of influence marked by excellence and purpose.")<br>- It becomes harder when you're just silently good because then you have to do even more that the work always speaks for itself.<br>- What we have to do is how do we support each other? How do we make sure we improve each other's ability to succeed? And how do we also champion other black people in the business? And then if they're not doing good is how do you help them?<br>-END | 1. **Diversity and Inclusion**<br>- Representation of Black Women in Leadership<br>- Industry-Specific Representation<br>- Progress and Change in Representation<br>- Collective Responsibility and Inclusivity<br>- National Representation and Employment Equity<br><br>2. **Organizational Culture, Strategy and Sponsorship**<br>- Diversity as a Strategic Commitment<br>- Organizational Culture and Sponsorship<br>- Organizational Culture and Change<br>- Leadership and Decision-Making<br>- Diversity Initiatives and Organizational Change<br><br>3. **Career Development and Advancement**<br>- Pipeline and Career Advancement<br>- Talent Development and Management<br>- Personal Strategies for Advancement<br>- Career Strategy and Expertise Building<br>- Professional Branding and Results<br><br>4. **Professional Relationships and Networking**<br>- Relationship Building and Networking<br>- Personal Experiences and Anecdotes<br><br>5. **Performance and Accountability**<br>- Incentives and Risks in Hiring<br>- Engagement and Values<br>- Talent Pipeline and Recruitment<br><br>6. **Risk Management and Opportunity**<br>- Risk-Taking and Opportunities<br><br>END |
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|---|---|---|---|
| **Participant 2: P02** | 1. **Underrepresentation in Leadership**<br>2. **Cultural Isolation and Political Dynamics**<br>3. **Mentorship and Sponsorship Impact**<br>4. **Deliberate Recruitment and Diversity Efforts**<br>5. **Organizational Culture and Inclusion**<br>6. **Personal Career Strategies**<br>7. **Impactful Initiatives for Career Advancement**<br>8. **Self-Care and Mental Wellness** | **Participant 2:**<br><br>1. **Underrepresentation in Leadership**<br>- The lack of mentorship and sponsorship programs specifically tailored to represent and support Black women professionals.<br>- The necessity of sponsorship for career advancement.<br><br>2. **Cultural Isolation and Political Dynamics**<br>- The feeling of cultural isolation as often the only Black leader in senior positions, unable to relate to peers and seniors.<br>- The absence of a supportive network for professional advice and guidance.<br>- The challenges of navigating political games and the need for emotional awareness in state-owned entities (SOEs).<br><br>3. **Mentorship and Sponsorship Impact**<br>- The positive impact of mentorship on confidence, overcoming imposter syndrome, and providing support in the corporate environment.<br>- The importance of therapy and coaching for mental wellness and career advancement.<br><br>4. **Deliberate Recruitment and Diversity Efforts**<br>- The effectiveness of deliberate and focused efforts by boards and management to recruit Black women for leadership roles, such as the CFO position.<br>- The need for concerted action to ensure diversity in the organization.<br><br>5. **Organizational Culture and Inclusion**<br>- The role of enforced inclusion and transformation in promoting Black women to leadership positions.<br>- The importance of placing Black women in roles across various functions, including engineering, operations, and finance.<br>- The recommendation to provide executive coaching to support Black women leaders and aspirants.<br><br>6. **Personal Career Strategies**<br>- The benefits of pursuing traditional male-dominated career paths and early exposure to these roles.<br>- The value of mentorship, career guidance, expanding networks, servant leadership, and continuous training.<br><br>7. **Impactful Initiatives for Career Advancement**<br>- The significance of obtaining qualifications and training.<br>- The advantage of being mentored by someone relatable who "looks like you."<br><br>8. **Self-Care and Mental Wellness**<br>- The risk of Black women leaders being destroyed by the pressures of corporate leadership and the choice some make to opt out.<br>- The importance of self-care, including therapy, online tools, reading, and looking after one's mental wellness.<br><br>Quotes:<br>- In the corporate sector, as a black woman professional you cannot really relate to your peers and seniors as you are often the only black leader in the top rungs. No one looks like you and you can't relate culturally. You don't have anyone who you can confide in, ask for professional advice and guidance as you have to be excellent all the time. It feels as if you are always under a microscope. You are not part of the inner circle who have their own club if white males. Their culture is different than yours as a Black woman<br>- I was young, very shy, introverted, scared and having a mentor helped a great deal early on in my career. Career guidance is important. Increasing your network, being a servant leader, doing training courses and motivating others are all actions that have helped me in my career to the top and which can help other Black women accelerate to the top<br>END | 1. **Structural Challenges and Representation**<br>- Underrepresentation in Leadership<br>- Deliberate Recruitment and Diversity Efforts<br><br>2. **Professional Development and Support**<br>- Mentorship and Sponsorship Impact<br>- Impactful Initiatives for Career Advancement<br>- Personal Career Strategies<br><br>3. **Organizational Culture and Inclusivity**<br>- Cultural Isolation and Political Dynamics<br>- Organizational Culture and Inclusion<br><br>4. **Wellness and Self-Preservation**<br>- Self-Care and Mental Wellness |
| **Participant 3: P03** | 1. **Historical and Socioeconomic Barriers**<br>2. **Organizational Culture and Bias**<br>3. **Perceptions of Competence**<br>4. **Workplace Challenges and Maternity Issues**<br>5. **Mentorship and Coaching**<br>6. **Networking and Professional Visibility**<br>7. **Inclusive Organizational Culture**<br>8. **Supportive Infrastructure and Investment**<br>9. **Personal Strategies for Advancement**<br>10. **Organizational Initiatives and Policies** | **Participant 3:**<br><br>1. **Historical and Socioeconomic Barriers**<br>- The long-term impact of South Africa's segregated history on the representation of Black women in leadership.<br>- Socioeconomic challenges, including financial position, access to education, and cultural aspects that limit networking opportunities.<br><br>2. **Organizational Culture and Bias**<br>- The lack of organizational support, awareness, and programs to facilitate the inclusion and promotion of Black women.<br>- The prevalence of unconscious bias where white men promote individuals who resemble themselves, excluding Black women from opportunities.<br><br>3. **Perceptions of Competence**<br>- The stereotype that men hold knowledge and women do not, affecting the credibility of Black women leaders.<br><br>4. **Workplace Challenges and Maternity Issues**<br>- The struggle to balance career advancement with family responsibilities, including the lack of facilities for new mothers.<br>- The political maneuvering that occurs during maternity leave, with colleagues vying for the positions of women who are temporarily absent.<br><br>5. **Mentorship and Coaching**<br>- The significant role of coaching in providing a safe space and tools to navigate the corporate world.<br>- The importance of mentorship in career development, despite the challenges in accessing mentors.<br><br>6. **Networking and Professional Visibility**<br>- The critical importance of networking and maintaining a high level of performance as a Black woman leader under constant scrutiny.<br><br>7. **Inclusive Organizational Culture**<br>- The need for organizations to be safe spaces free from judgment and discrimination.<br>- The importance of equal treatment and fair chances for promotion and growth.<br><br>8. **Supportive Infrastructure and Investment**<br>- The necessity for organizations to provide infrastructure that supports women in the workplace.<br>- The call for companies to invest in the growth and advancement of Black women leaders, beyond mere compliance.<br><br>9. **Personal Strategies for Advancement**<br>- Education in relevant fields, proactive professional engagement, and establishing a strong network.<br>- The value of having a coach and sharing experiences.<br><br>10. **Organizational Initiatives and Policies**<br>- The effectiveness of company policies and programs, such as back-to-work programs, women-led hackathons, and diversity targets.<br>- The embedding of diversity and inclusion in the company's culture and the active role of executives in driving these initiatives.<br><br>Quotes:<br>Having the right company policies and programmes in place. E.g. the company she works at have Back to work programmes for women who just had children, there are women-led hackathons, KPIs that are associated with their diversity targets, diversity and inclusions is embedded in the company's culture and she also drives it as an executive.<br>- . My coach gave me a safe space and also equipped her with the tools to navigate the corporate world. Mentorship is tricky as anyone can be chosen whereas coaches have years and years of experience. With mentorship you need to make yourself available and need to figure out as a mentee on how to get from point A to point B.<br>- END | 1. **Systemic and Historical Challenges**<br>- Historical and Socioeconomic Barriers<br>- Organizational Culture and Bias2. **Career Advancement Barriers**<br>- Perceptions of Competence<br>- Workplace Challenges and Maternity Issues3. **Professional Development Support**<br>- Mentorship and Coaching<br>- Networking and Professional Visibility4. **Inclusive Culture and Policy**<br>- Inclusive Organizational Culture<br>- Supportive Infrastructure and Investment5. **Personal Empowerment and Strategy**<br>- Personal Strategies for Advancement6. **Organizational Support and Initiatives**<br>- Organizational Initiatives and Policies |
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| **Participant 4: P04** | 1. **Representation and Progress**<br>2. **Cultural and Societal Factors**<br>3. **Workplace Dynamics**<br>4. **Work-Life Balance**<br>5. **Mentorship and Sponsorship**<br>6. **Organizational Policies and Initiatives**<br>7. **Professional Development and Company Responsibility**<br>8. **Personal Growth Strategies**<br>9. **Work Ethic and Recognition** | **Participant 4:**<br><br>1. **Representation and Progress**<br>- Perception of inadequate representation of black women in senior leadership.<br>- Slow progress over time in increasing representation at a global level.<br><br>2. **Cultural and Societal Factors**<br>- The impact of living in a patriarchal society on women's career advancement.<br>- The additional effort required by black women to be recognized and acknowledged.<br><br>3. **Workplace Dynamics**<br>- Challenges faced due to superficial leadership opportunities for women.<br>- The tokenism experienced by women in leadership roles.<br>- The struggle with impostor syndrome at senior levels.<br><br>4. **Work-Life Balance**<br>- The complexity of managing professional responsibilities and motherhood.<br>- Societal expectations and the division of attention between work and family life.<br><br>5. **Mentorship and Sponsorship**<br>- The critical role of mentorship and sponsorship in career growth.<br>- Personal experiences with both positive and negative mentorship.<br>- The importance of having a diverse range of mentors and sponsors.<br><br>6. **Organizational Policies and Initiatives**<br>- The effectiveness of making diversity and inclusion a KPI within organizations. | 1. **Career Advancement Barriers and Enablers**<br>- Representation and Progress<br>- Cultural and Societal Factors<br>- Workplace Dynamics<br>- Work-Life Balance<br><br>2. **Personal and Professional Development**<br>- Personal Growth Strategies<br>- Work Ethic and Recognition<br>- Holistic Well-being<br><br>3. **Support Systems**<br>- Mentorship and Sponsorship<br>- Professional Development and Company Responsibility<br><br>4. **Organizational Strategy and Culture**<br>- Organizational Policies and Initiatives<br>- Final Reflections and Advice |

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| | 10. **Holistic Well-being**<br><br>11. **Final Reflections and Advice** | - The observation that some multinational companies may prefer to pay penalties rather than genuinely pursue diversity.<br><br>7. **Professional Development and Company Responsibility**<br>- The need for companies to invest in individual professional development.<br>- The importance of companies being transparent and accountable for their diversity efforts.<br><br>8. **Personal Growth Strategies**<br>- Being curious and inquisitive as a means to succeed.<br>- Intentional communication about career ambitions and growth within the company.<br>- Building strategic internal and external relationships to support career advancement.<br><br>9. **Work Ethic and Recognition**<br>- The importance of a strong work ethic and being a significant contributor.<br>- The role of recognition and financial compensation in career advancement.<br>- Investment in personal growth through leadership training and other programs.<br><br>10. **Holistic Well-being**<br>- Recognizing the importance of balancing professional roles with personal life.<br>- The focus on holistic well-being as part of career success.<br><br>11. **Final Reflections and Advice**<br>- The emphasis on the importance of work ethic, mentorship, and personal well-being.<br>- Parting advice or caution for organizations and aspiring black women executives.<br><br>Quotes:<br>- Challenge of mine has a personal level has been I've struggled more recently; I would say like the most senior person with impostor syndrome. That's been a struggle of mine where you know, I've always known that I needed you know, I would play in an international stage I would execute to gain leadership and be doing all the things that I you know, not have the privilege of doing.<br>- People not based in South Africa, because I just find that getting diversity of perspectives and views has really helped me in advance in my career, because the reality is that as much as I'm less than African woman, living in Johannesburg, the nature of my work is so diverse<br>END | |
| **Participant 5: P05** | 1. **Transparency and Information Access**<br><br>2. **Acknowledgment of Women's Needs**<br><br>3. **Advocacy for Financial Gain**<br><br>4. **Personal Financial Responsibility**<br><br>5. **Economic Growth and Compensation**<br><br>6. **Gender Pay Gap and Salary Negotiation**<br><br>7. **Societal and Corporate Culture**<br><br>8. **Communities and Support Networks**<br><br>9. **Top Actions for Advancement** | **Participant 5:**<br>1. **Transparency and Information Access**<br>- The need for a culture that fosters transparency and provides women with access to information.<br>- The importance of allowing women to be visible through involvement in high-profile projects and initiatives.<br><br>2. **Acknowledgment of Women's Needs**<br>- Recognition that women's needs differ and that the current system is not designed to accommodate them.<br>- The responsibility of strong and vocal women in corporate to pave the way for others.<br><br>3. **Advocacy for Financial Gain**<br>- A culture that consciously advocates for the financial gain of women.<br>- Addressing the pay gap by being biased towards compensating women more fairly.<br><br>4. **Personal Financial Responsibility**<br>- Challenging assumptions about women's financial responsibilities and advocating for fair consideration in compensation.<br><br>5. **Economic Growth and Compensation**<br>- The conscious effort to accelerate economic growth for women, especially those of colour, by offering competitive or above-market rates.<br><br>6. **Gender Pay Gap and Salary Negotiation**<br>- The importance of questioning and comparing job offers to ensure equitable pay between men and women.<br><br>7. **Societal and Corporate Culture**<br>- The lack of true acknowledgment of women in society and the impact on corporate culture.<br>- The slow progress in gender equality due to societal norms and the absence of reminders for change.<br><br>8. **Communities and Support Networks**<br>- The creation of communities and forums specifically designed to support women, such as Women in Payments Africa.<br><br>9. **Top Actions for Advancement**<br>- Identifying key actions or changes that can be made internally by women or externally by organizations to support women's advancement.<br><br>Quotes:<br>- opportunities are discussed in forums maybe when women are not adequately represented. And even when those conversations happen, it's not top of mind to push the diversity agenda, whether it be around gender or whether it be around race<br>- as a female like I can feel the pressure especially when I think about So like for example, last week, I had to go to a networking event, and then I had work and then I had my family and kids. And I didn't go to the networking. Right because I looked at everything on my plate and I just I just don't have the capacity at the time<br>- The other one obviously being culture that acknowledges that they are women in the organization, and that women's needs are different because right now the system is not designed that way. And for me, the more women we have that are strong and vocal in corporate that is a responsibility.<br>END | 1. **Organizational Culture and Practices**<br>- Transparency and Information Access<br>- Acknowledgment of Women's Needs<br>- Advocacy for Financial Gain<br>- Economic Growth and Compensation<br>- Gender Pay Gap and Salary Negotiation<br><br>2. **Societal Influence and Corporate Progress**<br>- Societal and Corporate Culture<br>- Slow Progress in Gender Equality<br><br>3. **Empowerment and Support Mechanisms**<br>- Communities and Support Networks<br>- Top Actions for Advancement<br><br>4. **Personal Agency and Advocacy**<br>- Personal Financial Responsibility<br>- Challenging Assumptions and Advocating for Self |
| **Participant 6: P06** | 1. **Bias and Decision Making**<br><br>2. **Loneliness and Mental Load**<br><br>3. **Generational Optimism**<br><br>4. **Authenticity and Representation**<br><br>5. **Cultural Acceptance**<br><br>6. **Mentorship Dynamics**<br><br>7. **Work-Life Balance and Energy Allocation**<br><br>8. **Freedom and Personal Values**<br><br>9. **Cultural Acknowledgment and Change**<br><br>10. **Family Influence and Resilience**<br><br>11. **Feedback Reception and Growth**<br><br>12. **Authenticity and Vulnerability in Organizations**<br><br>13. **Grounding and Self-Identity**.<br><br>14. **Organizational Culture and Support**<br><br>15. **Career Resilience and Credibility**<br><br>16. **Personal Strategies for Advancement**<br><br>END | **Participant 6:**<br><br>1. **Bias and Decision Making**<br>- The persistence of biases among decision-makers.<br>- The additional scrutiny and pressure faced by women and people of colour when they make mistakes.<br><br>2. **Loneliness and Mental Load**<br>- The loneliness experienced by black women in corporate environments.<br>- The mental toll of high expectations and the desire for a normal life.<br><br>3. **Generational Optimism**<br>- The hope that the next generation of black professionals will have an easier path.<br>- The role of current leaders in paving the way for future generations.<br><br>4. **Authenticity and Representation**<br>- The importance of authenticity in the workplace.<br>- The influence of a leader's authenticity on team diversity and inclusion.<br><br>5. **Cultural Acceptance**<br>- The gradual acceptance and accommodation of blackness in corporate South Africa.<br>- The challenge of code-switching and the need for environments where individuals can be themselves.<br><br>6. **Mentorship Dynamics**<br>- The effectiveness of mentorship when it is based on genuine care and connection.<br>- The need for mentors to provide honest feedback and guidance.<br><br>7. **Work-Life Balance and Energy Allocation**<br>- The energy required to navigate workplace politics and repackage oneself.<br>- The desire for a work environment that does not demand excessive personal sacrifice.<br><br>8. **Freedom and Personal Values**<br>- The freedom to leave a work environment that clashes with personal values.<br>- The aspiration to create a work culture that is supportive and enabling.<br><br>9. **Cultural Acknowledgment and Change**<br>- The importance of acknowledging cultural differences and having open conversations about them.<br>- The decision-making process regarding staying at or leaving a table that does not align with one's values.<br><br>10. **Family Influence and Resilience**<br>- The impact of having a supportive father on a woman's resilience, self-confidence, and ability to hold space for others.<br>- The importance of self-assurance and self-worth in facing career challenges and avoiding the search for external validation.<br><br>11. **Feedback Reception and Growth**<br>- The value of being receptive to feedback, regardless of the giver's intentions, as a tool for personal and professional growth.<br>- The ability to use feedback constructively to improve oneself and the importance of not taking it personally.<br><br>12. **Authenticity and Vulnerability in Organizations**<br>- The need for organizations to support genuine authenticity and vulnerability among employees.<br>- The role of vulnerability in learning about oneself and reducing the fear of making mistakes.<br><br>13. **Grounding and Self-Identity**<br>- The significance of having something outside of work that provides grounding and a sense of self.<br>- The danger of defining oneself solely by one's professional role and the importance of maintaining a personal identity independent of work. | 1. **Personal Development and Resilience**<br>- Bias and Decision Making<br>- Feedback Reception and Growth<br>- Career Resilience and Credibility<br>- Family Influence and Resilience<br><br>2. **Workplace Culture and Dynamics**<br>- Loneliness and Mental Load<br>- Authenticity and Representation<br>- Cultural Acceptance<br>- Organizational Culture and Support<br><br>3. **Leadership and Influence**<br>- Generational Optimism<br>- Mentorship Dynamics<br>- Freedom and Personal Values<br>- Cultural Acknowledgment and Change<br><br>4. **Self-Identity and Work-Life Integration**<br>- Grounding and Self-Identity<br>- Work-Life Balance and Energy Allocation<br>- Authenticity and Vulnerability in Organizations<br><br>5. **Strategic Career Navigation**<br>- Personal Strategies for Advancement |

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| | | 14. **Organizational Culture and Support**<br>- The impact of organizational culture on the ability of black women leaders to thrive.<br>- The necessity for a culture that acknowledges and supports the unique needs of individuals.<br><br>15. **Career Resilience and Credibility**<br>- The need to experience and overcome adversity to build resilience and credibility as a leader.<br>- The understanding that personal hardships contribute to sustainable leadership and the ability to face them with a sense of self-worth.<br><br>16. **Personal Strategies for Advancement**<br>- The personal strategies employed by the Participant, such as being open to feedback and maintaining authenticity.<br>- The recognition of the importance of vulnerability and grounding in achieving career success.<br><br>Quotes:<br>- So, I think as a woman you actually have to have a sense of self assurance, self-worth. Because you're going to crash at some point, you're looking for external validation. The world's not always going to give it to you, and what happens when you don't get it now, here's the thing, somewhere in your career, you need to hit a wall. Somewhere in your career, you need to get friction, or fail or something. Sometimes it's more ways sometimes for some in major ways, but you have to go through it for you to be a credible senior leader.<br>- As pertains to sponsorship, I learned the hard way that you can't live without it. I learned the hard way by losing sponsorship and not realizing that I had and then only when you feel the absence of a Do you realize how important it was when you had.<br><br>END | |
| **Participant 7: P07** | 1. **Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership**<br><br>2. **Strategic Importance of Diversity**<br><br>3. **Succession Planning and Talent Development**<br><br>4. **Bias and Performance Expectations**<br><br>5. **Trust and Value in the Workplace**<br><br>6. **Personal Actions for Career Advancement**<br><br>7. **Mentorship and Organic Learning**<br><br>8. **Organizational Support and Talent Promotion**<br><br>9. **Incentivizing Talent Management**<br><br>10. **Recognition and Feedback** | **Participant 7:**<br><br>1. **Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership**<br>- The need for intentional inclusion of black women in leadership roles.<br>- The challenge of overcoming the perception that targeting diversity limits options.<br><br>2. **Strategic Importance of Diversity**<br>- Viewing the inclusion of diverse individuals as an operational necessity rather than a compliance issue.<br>- The potential for improved performance and sustainability when diversity is seen as a strategic advantage.<br><br>3. **Succession Planning and Talent Development**<br>- The importance of deliberate succession planning to create a pipeline of diverse talent.<br>- The need to manage expectations while preparing individuals for leadership roles.<br><br>4. **Bias and Performance Expectations**<br>- The inherent bias that women, especially women of colour, cannot perform at the same level as their male counterparts.<br>- The need to challenge the status quo and assumptions that change will lead to negative outcomes.<br><br>5. **Trust and Value in the Workplace**<br>- The importance of trust and value in the workplace, allowing for autonomy and flexibility.<br>- The need for formalized policies that support work-life balance and recognize the blurred lines between work and personal life.<br><br>6. **Personal Actions for Career Advancement**<br>- Continuous personal and professional development.<br>- The importance of emotional intelligence and the ability to separate personal feelings from professional actions.<br>- The willingness to take on new challenges and opportunities, even without full preparation.<br><br>7. **Mentorship and Organic Learning**<br>- The potential drawbacks of formal mentorship and the benefits of organic, non-contrived mentorship relationships.<br>- Learning by observing and emulating positive behaviors and also learning what not to repeat from negative examples.<br><br>8. **Organizational Support and Talent Promotion**<br>- The lack of specific policies or initiatives that effectively support the advancement of women within the Participant's experience.<br>- The importance of having champions within the organization who recognize and promote talent.<br><br>9. **Incentivizing Talent Management**<br>- The idea that managers should be incentivized to identify, manage, and promote talent within their teams.<br>- The positive impact of losing great team members as a testament to effective leadership and talent development.<br><br>10. **Recognition and Feedback**<br>- The value of receiving honest feedback and recognition for one's work.<br>- The importance of being able to accept compliments and champion others without diminishing one's own achievements.<br><br>Quotes:<br>- I think that if having more women in senior positions is positioned as an operational necessity, with viable monetization benefits, suddenly it becomes more palatable than sort of satisfying a correction of historical wrongs.<br>- sometimes it's lonely and people just got to meet this crap anymore. And those women amassed enough money to say, you know, what, do I really need to stay here for the salary to get this constant uphill? Constant? What began this constant criticism? Some companies are not doing much to inspire retention.<br>- END | 1. **Diversity and Inclusion Strategies**<br>- Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership<br>- Strategic Importance of Diversity<br>- Succession Planning and Talent Development<br><br>2. **Bias and Cultural Transformation**<br>- Bias and Performance Expectations<br>- Trust and Value in the Workplace<br><br>3. **Personal Empowerment and Career Growth**<br>- Personal Actions for Career Advancement<br>- Recognition and Feedback<br><br>4. **Mentorship and Professional Relationships**<br>- Mentorship and Organic Learning<br>- Organizational Support and Talent Promotion<br><br>5. **Organizational Policies and Incentives**<br>- Incentivizing Talent Management<br>- Work-Life Balance and Flexibility |
| **Participant 8: P08** | 1. **Underrepresentation and Socioeconomic Factors**<br><br>2. **Cultural and Corporate Barriers**<br><br>3. **Work-Life Balance and Family Responsibilities**<br><br>4. **Need for Corporate Sponsorship**<br><br>5. **Gender and Cultural Expectations**<br><br>6. **Career Advancement and Trajectory**<br><br>7. **Cultural and Gender Dynamics in Communication**<br><br>8. **Assertiveness and Perception**<br><br>9. **Inclusion and Exclusion in Corporate Culture**<br><br>10. **Initiatives for Women's Advancement**<br><br>11. **Mining Industry as a Transformation Leader**<br><br>12. **Personal Agency and Career Management**<br><br>13. **Stakeholder Engagement and Commercial Acumen**<br><br>14. **Mentorship and Sponsorship Impact**<br><br>15. **Organizational Culture and Psychological Safety** | **Participant 8:**<br><br>1. **Underrepresentation and Socioeconomic Factors**<br>- The underrepresentation of black women in leadership positions in corporate South Africa.<br>- The impact of socioeconomic circumstances and the personal sacrifices required for black women to achieve executive roles.<br><br>2. **Cultural and Corporate Barriers**<br>- The cultural constructs and expectations that black women must navigate to succeed in corporate environments.<br>- Corporate cultures that are unfriendly to women and resistant to divergent views.<br><br>3. **Work-Life Balance and Family Responsibilities**<br>- The challenge of balancing a senior corporate role with family responsibilities.<br>- The impact of having children on a woman's career trajectory.<br><br>4. **Need for Corporate Sponsorship**<br>- The importance of having a corporate sponsor to advance in the workplace.<br>- The observation that hard work alone is not sufficient without someone advocating for you in higher-level spaces.<br><br>5. **Gender and Cultural Expectations**<br>- The additional scrutiny and challenges faced by women, particularly black women, in senior roles.<br>- The discomfort and biases that organizations may have towards women who do not fit a traditional mould.<br><br>6. **Career Advancement and Trajectory**<br>- The slower career progression for women who take time off or work reduced hours due to family commitments.<br>- The perception that accommodating companies still cannot fully mitigate the career impact of motherhood.<br><br>7. **Cultural and Gender Dynamics in Communication**<br>- The impact of cultural differences and gender on workplace dynamics and communication.<br>- The challenge of not fitting into the informal networks and buddy systems that exist among male colleagues.<br><br>8. **Assertiveness and Perception**<br>- The perception of assertiveness in women and the cultural expectations around when and how to speak in meetings.<br>- The double standards applied to women's behaviour compared to men's in professional settings.<br><br>9. **Inclusion and Exclusion in Corporate Culture**<br>- The exclusion from certain informal corporate activities and discussions that can impact career progression.<br>- The importance of creating an inclusive environment where everyone has the opportunity to contribute.<br><br>10. **Initiatives for Women's Advancement**<br>- The effectiveness of initiatives and programs designed to identify and develop high-potential individuals, particularly women, in the workplace.<br>- The role of structured roles and programs in providing exposure and development opportunities.<br><br>11. **Mining Industry as a Transformation Leader**<br>- The mining industry's progress in terms of transformation and the promotion of women to leadership roles.<br>- Compliance with regulatory frameworks as a driver for change, even if initially motivated by "malicious compliance."<br><br>12. **Personal Agency and Career Management**<br>- The importance of personal agency in steering one's career path and not leaving advancement to | **1. Structural and Cultural Barriers**<br>- Underrepresentation and Socioeconomic Factors<br>- Cultural and Corporate Barriers<br>- Gender and Cultural Expectations<br>- Cultural and Gender Dynamics in Communication<br><br>2. **Career Development and Advancement**<br>- Career Advancement and Trajectory<br>- Need for Corporate Sponsorship<br>- Initiatives for Women's Advancement<br>- Mining Industry as a Transformation Leader<br><br>3. **Work-Life Integration**<br>- Work-Life Balance and Family Responsibilities<br>- Assertiveness and Perception<br>- Inclusion and Exclusion in Corporate Culture<br><br>4. **Personal Empowerment and Agency**<br>- Personal Agency and Career Management<br>- Stakeholder Engagement and Commercial Acumen<br>- Mentorship and Sponsorship Impact<br><br>5. **Organizational Culture and Support**<br>- Organizational Culture and Psychological Safety |

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| | | chance.<br>- The strategy of actively seeking exposure and engaging with executives to expand one's network and visibility.<br><br>13. **Stakeholder Engagement and Commercial Acumen**<br>- The need for stakeholder mapping and planning interactions with executives to advance one's career.<br>- The emphasis on developing commercial acumen and the ability to discuss business issues beyond one's immediate role.<br><br>14. **Mentorship and Sponsorship Impact**<br>- The critical impact of mentorship and sponsorship on career advancement.<br>- The responsibility of women leaders to open doors for others and the importance of being commercially savvy.<br><br>15. **Organizational Culture and Psychological Safety**<br>- The necessity of an organizational culture that supports divergent views and psychological safety.<br><br>Quotes:<br>- I think that corporate is just typically not friendly to women<br>- it's also like it's about like you saying but agency like you kind of steering your career path. You know, and not leaving it to chance and not waiting for somebody to do it for you.<br>End | |