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Factors influencing the advancement of women into executive management in Gauteng's infrastructure sector

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

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Dedication

Like Ganesha, if I were asked to walk around the world, I would walk around my universe; my original big five: Lutchmee Ramsaroop, Dr. Pravina Ramsaroop Baijnath, Narranjan Baijnath, Ulishia and Yuri. You are my centre, my strength and my sanctuary. This thesis is lovingly dedicated to you.

To Climo Appel, Joshua Naicker, Sitara Zhara and Zaria Suri; you are my joy, the light that floods my world and the laughter that reminds me to breathe. May your feet always find home.

Ulishia Baijnath, my heart beats to the rhythm of yours - always and forever.

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To the courageous women who participated in this study; Mariah, Margaret, Mapholba, Kia and Nancy; thank you for entrusting me with your stories. Your honesty and willingness to speak truth to power have shaped the core of this work. This thesis is not merely an academic exercise; it is a commitment to ensure that your voices are no longer sidelined, silenced or ignored. Your truths will echo far beyond these pages. Change is on her way.

I extend my profound gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Jenika Gobind**,** whose unwavering guidance, incisive feedback and steadfast support have been instrumental throughout the development and completion of this thesis.

Dr Leila Groenewald, Prof Ashwin Desai, thank you for an unshakeable foundation.

Declaration

I, Ramona Baijnath declare this thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree Master of Business Administration at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, is my work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

Signature:



Date: June 2025

ABSTRACT

This study critically investigates the persistent underrepresentation of women in executive management within the Gauteng Department of Infrastructure Development (DID), a pivotal institution in South Africa's male-dominated public infrastructure sector. Despite progressive policy frameworks, including the Employment Equity Act (1998) and national mandates for 50% female representation at all senior levels, systemic gender disparities remain deeply entrenched.

Guided by African feminist epistemology and employing narrative inquiry, this qualitative study centres the lived experiences of five women senior managers; Mariah, Margaret, Mapholba, Kia and Nancy [pseudonyms] to interrogate the complex organisational, personal and intersectional factors influencing women's advancement into executive roles at the DID.

Findings reveal that organisational barriers, including political gatekeeping, pervasive surveillance and entrenched Boys' Club networks, systematically obstruct participants progression. Participants describe confronting the dual burdens of the glass ceiling, which limits promotion and the glass cliff, where women are assigned high-risk, under-resourced portfolios intended to absorb institutional failure. This hostile environment denies women authority, recognition and support, resulting in widespread burnout and emotional exhaustion.

On a personal level, caregiving responsibilities, lack of mentorship and absence of formal development pathways exacerbate these challenges, disproportionately impacting ethnic minority women and compounding systemic exclusion. The experiences of harassment, marginalisation and intellectual erasure further underscore gendered institutional violence as a deliberate mechanism to enforce women's marginality.

Importantly, the study refutes narratives that blame women for their stalled progression. Instead, it reveals how institutional complicity sustains inequality by rewarding conformity to masculinised leadership norms and punishing dissent. Participants exhibit agency through organisational resistance, subversion and redefining leadership beyond traditional frameworks.

This research calls for bold systemic reforms, including transparent leadership pipelines, intersectional HR policies and trauma-informed trusted wellness initiatives. Genuine gender equity demands dismantling entrenched power structures and reconstructing institutions on the principles of care, accountability and justice.

Table of Contents

LIST OF ACRONYMS 7

1. CHAPTER ONE 9

1.1 RESEARCH TITLE 9
1.2 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE 9
1.3 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY 9
1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT 9
1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES 10
1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS 10
1.7 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY 10
1.8 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY 12
1.9 ASSUMPTIONS 13
1.10 SUMMARY 13

2. CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW 14

2.1 INTRODUCTION 14
2.2 EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW 14
2.2.1 PUBLIC SERVICE ENVIRONMENT: FLOORS, CEILINGS, DOORS AND BENCHES 14
2.2.2 PERSONAL FACTORS: WORK-LIFE-WIFE 18
2.3 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK 19
2.4 SUMMARY 20

3. CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 22

3.1 INTRODUCTION 22
3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND DECISIONS 22
3.3 POPULATION 22
3.4 SAMPLE AND SAMPLING METHOD 23
3.5 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS AND DATA COLLECTION 23
3.6 DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGIES AND INTERPRETATION 24
3.7 LIMITATIONS 24
3.8 TRANSFERABILITY 24
3.9 TRUTHFULNESS AND VALIDATION 24
3.10 TRUSTWORTHINESS 25
3.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS 25
3.12 SUMMARY 26

4.CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS 27

4.1 INTRODUCTION 27
4.2 OVERVIEW AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND OF PARTICIPANTS 28
4.2.1 MARIAH: GOOD ENOUGH FOR THE WORK BUT NOT THE TITLE 28
4.2.2 MARGARET: SYSTEM OF SELECTIVE PROTECTION AND STRUCTURAL CEILINGS 29
4.2.3 MAPHOLBA: ONCE YOU JOIN THE DID YOU STAGNATE AND REGRESS 30
4.2.4 KIA: I DON'T WANT THE DEGRADATION 31
4.2.5 NANCY: DID IS NOT MY COMPANY - THEY WILL REPLACE ME 32
4.3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS 33

4.4 ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE WOMEN'S PROGRESSION INTO EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT.....33
4.4.1 RECOGNITION, CREDIBILITY AND PROFESSIONAL VALUE: THE INVISIBLE BATTLE FOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT 33
4.4.2 GLASS CEILING.....34
4.4.3 GLASS CLIFF 34
4.4.4 GLASS CLIFF & GLASS CEILING INTERSECTION 34
4.4.5 SEXUAL HARASSMENT, VERBAL ABUSE, INTELLECTUAL ERASURE & EXCLUSION 35
4.5 PERSONAL FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE WOMEN'S PROGRESSION INTO EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT.....37
4.5.1 BURNOUT, CAREGIVING AND THE DOUBLE BURDEN 37
4.5.2 CONDITIONAL OR LIMITED PARTNER SUPPORT.....38
4.5.3 EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE, COPING AND SELF-MANAGEMENT.....39
4.5.4 STRATEGIC RESISTANCE AND QUIET REBELLION 40
4.5.5 CONFORMING TO SURVIVE.....40
4.5.6 BEYOND THIS "MESS": SUBVERSION & REDEFINING SUCCESS.....41
4.6 EXPERIENCES OF ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN 42
4.6.1 TOXIC WORKPLACE CULTURE, GENDER BARRIERS AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS.....42
4.6.2 THE BOYS' CLUB AND WEAPONISED ABUSE 42
4.6.3 STRUCTURAL CAREER BARRIERS.....43
4.7 INHIBITORS OF ADVANCEMENT 44
4.7.1 INSTITUTIONAL SABOTAGE AND STALLED PROGRESSION 45
4.7.2 PATRONAGE, PRESELECTION AND POLITICAL GATEKEEPING 45
4.7.3 THE MISSING LADDER: LACK OF MENTORSHIP AND GROWTH.....46
4.7.4 PERFORMING POWER IN A MASCULINE REGISTER 47
4.7.5 FRACTURED SISTERHOOD AND GENDERED COMPETITION.....48
4.7.6 EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COST OF STAYING 48
4.7.6.1 LEADERSHIP AS ILLNESS 48
4.7.6.2 PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL OF HARASSMENT 49
4.8 FURTHER INSIGHTS FROM PARTICIPANTS.....50
4.9 DISCUSSION 53
4.9.1. THE GLASS CEILING, GLASS CLIFF AND THE POLITICS OF RISK.....53
4.9.2. SEXUAL HARASSMENT, INTELLECTUAL ERASURE AND EXCLUSION AS TOOLS OF DISCIPLINE 54
4.9.3. THE MISSING LADDER: DEVELOPMENTAL NEGLECT AND BIASED LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT54
4.9.4. THE EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COST OF STAYING.....54
4.9.5 BURNOUT, CAREGIVING AND THE DOUBLE BURDEN 55
4.9.6 CONDITIONAL SPOUSAL SUPPORT.....55
4.9.7 EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE AND STRATEGIC SILENCE 55
4.9.8 STRATEGIC RESISTANCE AND QUIET REBELLION 56
4.9.8.1 CONFORMING TO SURVIVE 56
4.9.8.2 REDEFINING SUCCESS AND RECLAIMING AUTONOMY.....56
4.10 CONCLUSION 56

5. CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS 58

5.1 INTRODUCTION 58
5.1.1 ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE WOMEN'S PROGRESSION INTO EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT.....58
5.1.2 PERSONAL FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE WOMEN'S PROGRESSION INTO EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT.....59
5.1.3 EXPERIENCES OF MINORITY WOMEN 59
5.1.4 WOMEN AS INHIBITORS OF THEIR OWN ADVANCEMENT 60
5.2 REFLECTIONS AND LIMITATIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS.....61

5.4 PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS.....65
5.5 FUTURE STUDIES.....66
5.6 CONCLUSION.....67

6. REFERENCES.....70

7. ANNEXURE 1: GENDER REPRESENTATION OF SMS.....79

ANNEXURE 2: BREAKDOWN OF GPG DEPARTMENTS.....80
ANNEXURE 3: RANKING OF GPG DEPARTMENTS.....81
ANNEXURE 4: DID DISAGGREGATION OF POPULATION.....82
ANNEXURE 5: INFORMATION SHEET.....83
ANNEXURE 6: RESEARCH INSTRUMENT.....85
ANNEXURE 7: INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....89
ANNEXURE 9: ETHICAL CLEARANCE.....92
ANNEXURE 10: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS.....93

List of Acronyms

AFF:	African Feminist Forum
CD:	Chief Director
CoGTA:	Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs
COO:	Chief Operating Officer
DARDE:	Gauteng Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment
DDG:	Deputy Director-General
DED:	Gauteng Department of Economic Development
DEI:	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
DG:	Director General
DID:	Department of Infrastructure Development
DPSA:	Department of Public Service and Administration
EEA:	Employment Equity Act
e-Gov:	Department of e-Government
EMT:	Executive Management Team
EPWP:	Expanded Public Works Programme
GDCS:	Gauteng Department of Community Safety
GDE:	Gauteng Department of Education
GDoH:	Gauteng Department of Health
GPT:	Gauteng Provincial Treasury
DHS:	Gauteng Department of Human Settlements
GDRT:	Gauteng Department of Roads and Transport
GDSD:	Gauteng Department of Social Development
GSNI:	Gender and Social Norms Index
HoD:	Head of Department
ILO:	International Labour Organisation
IRPS:	Infrastructure Research, Planning and Systems
MEC:	Member of the Executive Council
NQF:	National Qualifications Framework
OoP:	Office of the Premier
POPI:	Protection of Personal Information Act
SMS:	Senior Management Services

SMT: Senior Management Team

SARC: Gauteng Department of Sport, Art, Culture and Recreation

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

1. Chapter One

1.1 Research title

Factors influencing the advancement of women into executive management in Gauteng's infrastructure sector.

1.2 Statement of purpose

The purpose of this research is to determine the factors which influence the advancement of women senior managers into executive management at the Gauteng Department of Infrastructure Development [DID].

1.3 Background of the study

On 30 November 2005, Cabinet, through Memorandum 86A of 2005, adopted an employment equity target aiming for 50% representation of women at all levels of the Senior Management Service [SMS] by 31 March 2009 (DPSA, 2006). Despite various policy instruments aimed at promoting gender equality, including the Employment Equity Act [EEA] of 1998 and the 1997 White Paper on Human Resource Management, gender equality targets remain unmet nearly two decades later. The Department of Public Service and Administration [DPSA] highlights that women in SMS often find themselves "stuck" in specific positions, indicating a persistent barrier to upward mobility (2006).

1.4 Problem statement

While legislative and policy instruments have increased women's representation in SMS, gender inequality in the public service persists. It is concerning that when women are employed in SMS, the majority are at the entry level of Director, level 13 with progressively lessor representation at the higher levels of Chief Director, level 14 [CD], Deputy Director-General, level 15 [DDG] and Head of Department [HoD] or Director General [DG] level 16. This situation is exacerbated within the public infrastructure sector which traditionally has a lower representation of women professionals in the construction and maintenance areas. It is alarming that women at the bottom rungs of SMS tend to not progress or experience protracted delayed progression to executive management.

1.5 Research objectives

Utilising an African feminist epistemology, this study seeks to narrate the factors, perspectives and experiences influencing the advancement of women senior managers into the upper rungs of executive management at the DID, a provincial government, infrastructure sector department.

1.6 Research questions

What are the factors influencing the progression of women into executive management at the DID?

Sub-questions:

1. What are the organisational factors which influence women's progression into executive management?
2. What are the personal factors which influence women's progression into executive management?
3. What are the experiences of ethnic minority women?
4. Are women inhibitors of their own advancement?

1.7 Rationale of the study

Contemporary research primarily focuses on the factors affecting the progression of women middle managers to senior management roles (Cross, 2009). Kahn and Louw (2011) analysed organisational barriers for women in South Africa's public service. Bello et al., (2022) analysed glass ceiling barriers in Nigeria's construction sector, while April et al., (2007) and Mpemba (2018) explored factors limiting South African women's entry into executive roles. Despite this focus, gaps remain regarding women's upward mobility to executive positions, particularly in South Africa's public service. This gap is particularly pronounced in the public infrastructure sector. Rarer still is the availability of narrative accounts extrapolated from the lived experience of participants.

An analysis of 14 Gauteng Provincial Government [GPG] Departments including the Office of the Premier [OoP] (2024), Gauteng Department of Social Development [GDSD] (2024), Gauteng Department of Human Settlements [GDHS] (2024), Gauteng Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment [DARDE] (2024), Gauteng Department of Sport, Art, Culture and Recreation [SACR] (2024), Gauteng

Department of Community Safety [GDCS] (2024), Gauteng Department of Education [GDE] (2024), Gauteng Department of Economic Development [DED] (2024), Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs [CoGTA] (2024), Gauteng Department of Health [GDoH] (2024), Department of e-Government [e-Gov] (2024), Gauteng Provincial Treasury [GPT] (2024), Department of Infrastructure Development [DID] (2024a) and Gauteng Department of Roads and Transport [GDRT] (2024) drawing from their 2023-2024 Annual Reports revealed that of the 610 senior managers in the province, only 45.4% were female, meaning that the GPG had not reached 50% representation of women in SMS much less the 50% across all levels of the SMS [Annexure 1] across the Province.

The data [Annexure 2] indicated that six of the 14 departments; OoP, GDSD, GDHS, DARDE, GDCS and SACR had achieved between 54%-66% of the target. However, the remaining eight had not obtained the target. The lowest performing departments [Annexure 3] included GPT with 40%, DID with 38% and GDRT with 36%. This data shows a clear disparity in women's representation between senior management levels 13 and 14 and executive management levels 15 and 16 in Gauteng's public sector departments.

When disaggregating the GPG data, women hold 34 out of 90 executive management positions or 37.8%, while men occupy 56 positions or 62.2%, revealing a significant underrepresentation of women in executive management. This means that women are significantly underrepresented at the apex of decision making and influence. At senior management, women occupy 253 out of 572 positions or 44.3%, closer to parity but still lagging behind men, who hold 319 positions or 55.7%. This data exposes a troubling drop in women's representation as they advance; from 44.3% in senior management down to just 37.8% in executive management. Meanwhile, men's share increases from 55.7% to 62.2%. These figures highlight a throttling of women's progression into executive management. Despite a strong presence at lower senior levels, women face persistent barriers to reaching the top.

Across the departments, there are significantly more women in levels 13 and 14 (253) compared to executive management (34). While some departments like the OoP and GDSD have high percentages of women in executive management, most show a sharp decline in female representation as positions become more senior. Notably,

departments such as the GPT have a strong female presence in senior management but no women in executive management roles. Whilst the DID has a large gap in female representation, with only 22 women out of 60 SMS at levels 13 and 14. This indicates that although women are well represented at senior management levels, they face barriers to advancement into executive management. This makes it vitally important to study the factors influencing the progression of women into executive management at the DID.

Two of the three bottom performers; the DID and GDRT are within the infrastructure sector which has a bias to employing male employees. Despite progressive legislation in South Africa, the infrastructure sector continues to exhibit a strong gender bias favouring male employees. Women face persistent barriers including discrimination, harassment and cultural stereotypes that restrict their entry and advancement (Zungu, 2024; English & Le Jeune, 2012). Structural issues such as inflexible work conditions and lack of mentorship also contribute to their underrepresentation (Sangweni & Root, 2015). Furthermore, policy implementation remains weak, limiting real change (English & Le Jeune, 2012). These factors collectively reinforce a male-dominated environment that inhibits gender equity in the infrastructure industry which maybe reflective of the substantially lower representation of women across all levels of SMS within these departments.

This study will seek to provide a holistic view of the experiences of five women senior managers at the DID exploring the factors influencing the progression of women in the public infrastructure sector into executive management. Through this feminist narrative inquiry, the research will gather comprehensive narratives from participants to better understand this phenomenon. The study may provide guidance on how the sector can attain more gender inclusivity in the upper ranks of executive management.

1.8 Delimitations of the study

The study targets women senior managers within the DID, with deliberate delimitations to explore the experiences of this specific subgroup within the public infrastructure sector's SMS. The delimitations are defined by gender, senior managerial role and geographic location, ensuring that the research question and objectives are aligned with the chosen study population.

1.9 Assumptions

The study operates under the assumption that participants will provide truthful accounts of their experiences. To facilitate honest and comprehensive disclosure, participants have been provided with assurances of confidentiality.

1.10 Summary

This study investigates the factors influencing the advancement of women into executive management within Gauteng's DID. Despite progressive gender equity legislation, women remain underrepresented at executive levels, particularly in male-dominated sectors like infrastructure. Drawing on African feminist epistemology, the research explores the lived experience of five women senior managers through narrative inquiry. This research investigates the factors influencing the progression of women into executive management at the DID, with a focus on organisational dynamics, personal barriers, the experiences of ethnic minority women and the extent to which women may internalise or contribute to their own marginalisation. The study seeks to expose structural and cultural inhibitors and contribute towards building more gender-inclusive, transformative leadership pathways in the public infrastructure sector.

The subsequent chapter undertakes a critical review of the relevant literature and delineates the African feminist analytical framework that underpins the theoretical and analytical orientation of this study.

2. Chapter Two: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

According to the United Nations Development Programme's (2023), Gender and Social Norms Index [GSNI], increasing women's representation in executive management can challenge stereotypes and drive legal reforms for women's rights, introducing diverse perspectives and gender-sensitive agendas that influence policy outcomes. The GSNI highlights that women hold only 31% of executive leadership positions in public administration globally (UNDP, 2023). Thöni and Volk (2021) argue that greater representation of women in leadership correlates with improved public services and development outcomes. The South African government set a gender equality target to obtain 50% representation of women at all levels of SMS in 2005. Nineteen years later in 2024, the government had only attained 43% representation of women in SMS (Makhasi, 2024). This makes it critical to research the factors which influence the progression of women in SMS to executive management.

Building on the problem statement, scope, research questions and rationale established in the preceding chapter, this chapter presents a rigorous critique of the relevant literature and articulates the African feminist analytical framework that anchors the study's theoretical and methodological foundation.

2.2 Empirical literature review

The first section on this review will delve into the public service barriers to attain gender equality in SMS. The latter part will detail the personal limitations to the career progression of women.

2.2.1 Public service environment: floors, ceilings, doors and benches

According to the DPSA (2009) the SMS is mainly composed of African men, followed by African women, with lower representation from White men, White women, Asian men, Coloured men, Asian women and Coloured women. This indicates that while some women may progress, racial exclusion persists for minorities, suggesting that intersectional identities, including race and gender can hinder equity. Mello and Phago (2007) argue that patriarchy continues in the public service, as men in leadership often appoint other men, impeding women's advancement.

Kahn and Louw (2011) argue that a glass ceiling restricts women in SMS, where they mainly reach Director and CD positions but are significantly under-represented in executive roles. This demonstrates that the public service has not only failed to reach 50% female representation in SMS but also struggles to integrate women at all levels, indicating a ceiling on their progression. Mathur-Helm (2005) notes that the majority of women in SMS are African Black, with minimal representation from minority groups, suggesting prevalent racial discrimination and exclusion within the public service.

Ngalo and Mtsweni (2024) content that the glass cliff which describes a pattern where women are appointed to leadership roles during periods of institutional crisis or instability, positions them in precarious roles with limited support and or resources is present in the South African public service. Toni and Moodly (2019) argue the glass cliff, reinforces institutional cultures that undermine women's authority resulting in women leaders face heightened scrutiny, increased risk of failure and reduced long-term influence.

A DPSA (2007) survey revealed a concerning preference among SMS women for male managers, who are perceived as more lenient, while female managers were viewed as stricter and harder on women in junior positions. This could be a manifestation of queen bee syndrome. This term, coined by Staines et al., (1973), describes women in executive roles who protect their interests and exclude those in lower ranks (Mathur-Helm, 2005). Additionally, likeability bias affects women's advancement, as assertive women often receive less support and fewer promotions compared to equally qualified men. Women face a double bind, they must be assertive to be perceived as competent but this can diminish their likability; a challenge men do not encounter (Lean In, 2024).

The DPSA seeks to eliminate barriers to women's mobility in SMS, aiming for a "barrier-free public service" (2009). The department (2006) highlights the glass ceiling effect, coined by Loden in 1978, which refers to invisible barriers hindering women's advancement, including gender-biased rules, limited training, family responsibilities and negative perceptions of women leaders. McKinsey and Company (2023) identify performance bias as harmful to women's promotions, with women assessed on past achievements while men are evaluated for future potential. They recommend implementing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion [DEI] metrics to ensure that the

intersectional aspects of women's identities such as race, age, ability and class are recognised, preventing a homogenous approach to integrating women into executive management.

In 2007, the DPSA introduced the 8 Principle Plan of Action to promote women's empowerment and gender equality in the public service, aiming to create a non-sexist policy environment, meet equity targets, support gender mainstreaming, implement empowerment programs and ensure effective monitoring. Despite these and other interventions, the needle moved from 34.87% in 2009 to 43% in 2024 (Makhasi, 2024), signalling a minuscule shift of 8.13% over 15 years. Kahn and Low (2011) assert that it will take centuries for women to attain parity with men in executive management roles.

The progression of women SMS in infrastructure is even more constrained. Dicke et al., (2019); Jacobs (2019) and Stewart et al., (2021); find that societal expectations and gender stereotypes significantly shape career choices, leading women toward caregiving and service-oriented fields, while men are often encouraged to enter engineering, technology and construction. According to Aydın and Erbil (2022); Cheng and Yang (2021); Çivici and Yemişçioğlu (2021); Madikizela and Haup (2010); Naoum et al., (2020); Naismith et al., (2017) and Shola and Abdulazeez (2020); women in the infrastructure sector encounter barriers to advancement due to the industry's, boys construction club which is traditionally masculine with sexist attitudes manifesting as biased gender social norms. The International Labour Organisation [ILO] (2017) describes unconscious gender bias, as autopilot cognitive associations with traditions, norms, values, culture and stereotypes regarding women's abilities and leadership which can result in biased evaluations, scant promotions and limited access to senior positions.

The ILO's (2017) findings on unconscious gender bias highlight systemic barriers that restrict women's advancement, directly impacting an organisation's bench strength by narrowing the internal leadership talent pipeline. Bench strength refers to an organisation's ability to identify, develop and retain internal talent ready to assume leadership roles. This supports long-term sustainability and reduces dependency on external hires (Lyness & Heilman, 2006). It is closely linked to succession planning and maintaining organisational continuity. The concept draws on organisational

theories such as Role Congruity Theory, which explains how leadership perceptions are influenced by gender stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The Stereotype Content Model also provides insight, showing that women may be viewed as warm but less competent. This perception affects leadership assessments (Fiske et al., 2002).

Advantages of bench strength include leadership stability, cost-effective succession, and improved employee engagement (Heilman, 2001; Lyness & Heilman, 2006). However, risks include internal homogeneity, favouritism and the reinforcement of existing inequalities, particularly if diversity is not prioritised (Zhang, 2019; Heilman & Lyness, 2006). Nzimakwe and Pillay (2014) argue that political interference in senior appointments further erodes the effectiveness of leadership pipelines.

Developing bench strength requires several strategic initiatives. Succession planning and regular talent reviews help identify high-potential employees (Zhang & Rajagopalan, 2010). Structured leadership programmes, including job rotations and challenging assignments, prepare candidates for complex roles. Mentorship and coaching provide targeted support and enable knowledge transfer. Strong performance management systems, including consistent feedback, help align personal development with organisational goals. Furthermore, DEI initiatives expand the talent pool and ensure that leadership development efforts are equitable (Zhang & Rajagopalan, 2010).

Finally, bench strength is essential for leadership continuity and organisational resilience. To be effective, organisations must embed inclusive practices, address bias, and invest in structured development frameworks. This approach not only prepares future leaders but also enhances fairness, innovation and long-term performance.

Despite efforts to advance gender equality in South Africa's public service, systemic barriers, unconscious bias and limited bench strength hinder women's progression to executive roles, necessitating inclusive, intersectional leadership development strategies. Therefore, it is vital to study the experiences of women SMS in the infrastructure sector to determine the factors influencing their progression into executive management.

2.2.2 Personal factors: work-life-wife

In South Africa, societal norms expect women to take career breaks to fulfil their caregiving responsibilities creating the perception that women are not ideal workers, a discriminatory practice which impacts negatively on their career progression (April et al., 2007). Booysen (2007) and Pile (2004) assert that a significant challenge for women in senior management is balancing career and family responsibilities.

Waldfogel (1998) argues that the belief that women must sacrifice family to pursue executive careers remains prevalent. The findings of the April et al., (2007) study indicate women in leadership roles rely on home support systems, such as au pairs, domestic help and engaged partners to focus on their careers, acknowledging that they could not succeed without this assistance. However, not all women benefit from these support systems and many cannot depend on their partners for assistance. In South Africa, married women face increased cultural, social and caregiving responsibilities, yet the literature offers limited exploration of the work-life-wife balance.

Societal pressures regarding women's child-rearing roles significantly impact their career decisions related to work-life balance (April et al., 2007). According to Correll et al., (2007); Burgess, (2013); and Kim and Hahn, (2022), women face a motherhood penalty in the workplace, resulting in perceptions of lower competence and commitment, reduced salaries, fewer advancement opportunities and less representation in leadership roles compared to fathers and childfree women.

Role incongruity described by Torres et al., (2024) highlights the conflict between traditional female roles and leadership expectations, disadvantaging women and gender-diverse individuals who are mothers from ascending to executive leadership positions due to the stereotypical association of leadership with masculinity and its incongruity with the stereotype of feminine mothering.

Societal expectations, caregiving responsibilities and the motherhood penalty hinder South African women’s leadership progression, as role incongruity and limited support systems challenge their ability to balance work, life, and cultural norms. Given the host of personal factors and the agency exhibited from women, it is imperative to study this phenomenon within the appropriate context.

2.3 Analytical framework

Feminism has developed through three distinct waves from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, each shaping its discourse (Hooks, 1998). The first wave prioritised the legislative rights of middle-class white women in the first world, while the second wave expanded the feminist agenda but ultimately led to a hegemonic form of feminism that overlooked diversity (Truth, 1851) . The third wave critiqued this hegemony, emphasising the diverse and non-monolithic nature of women's experiences (Walker, 1991).

These waves fall short in addressing the complexities of women's issues in Africa. Naidu (2010) argues that African women's experiences cannot be conflated with those of black women globally due to their unique socio-political contexts. Feminist and Black feminist theories often create a dangerous homogeneity that obscures individual narratives. Sowa (2015) advocates for recognising African women's agency and personal strategies, moving beyond victimisation.

Sen (2017) posits that agency is vital for human development, emphasising the freedom to pursue individual values. Biased gender norms undermine women's agency, manifesting as imposter syndrome and low self-confidence, which can hinder career advancement. Davies (1991) highlights how oppressive discourses perpetuate women's subordination, urging feminist researchers to create counter-narratives that visibilise women's agency. Management texts are in the main authored by men, directed at men and from the positionality of men, excluding women from the discourse (Crainer, 2003). Texts with a masculine bias can fail to address emerging trends in the workforce pertaining to the progression of women from senior management into executive management (Kellan, 2008).

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that explores how different social identities, such as race, gender, class, sexuality and disability interact to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression. Coined by Crenshaw (1989), the term critiques the limitations of single-axis approaches in feminist and anti-racist thinking. Crenshaw introduced intersectionality to highlight the compounded discrimination experienced by Black women, who are often excluded from dominant narratives in both feminist and racial justice movements.

Collins (1986) augmented the concept through her theory of the matrix of domination, emphasising that oppressions are interconnected and structurally embedded. Similarly, Mohanty (1984) critiqued the colonial underpinnings of Western feminism, arguing for a more global and postcolonial perspective that centres women from the Global South. Greenaway and Eibach (2008) added the concept of intersectional invisibility, showing how people with multiple marginalised identities are often rendered invisible in both social and institutional contexts.

Intersectionality is essential as it provides a more nuanced and holistic understanding of social inequality. It informs inclusive research practices, promotes equity in policy-making and ensures that voices at the margins are acknowledged. By recognising the complexity of individual identities and systemic power, intersectionality offers a critical lens for creating meaningful social change.

The African Feminist Forum [AFF], established in 2006, adopted a Charter of Feminist Principles affirming a commitment to dismantling patriarchy. This research aligns with the AFF's approach, focusing on African women as subjects within their historical contexts while emphasising their agency. The study will employ postmodern feminist theory as its critical framework to explore factors influencing the progression of women senior managers into executive roles.

2.4 Summary

This chapter offers a comprehensive literature review examining factors influencing women's advancement into executive management, particularly in South Africa's public service and infrastructure sector. It explores organisational barriers such as the glass ceiling, gender biases and racial exclusion, alongside personal challenges including work-life balance and societal expectations. The chapter critically engages with feminist theory, emphasising African feminist perspectives and intersectionality to address unique socio-political contexts. It highlights the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior roles despite policy efforts, underscoring the need for inclusive leadership development grounded in nuanced, context-specific frameworks.

This study contextualises the experiences of five women in senior management levels 13 and 14 in the public infrastructure sector, illustrating how they navigate challenges and leverage resources to advance their careers, demonstrating that their agency is active and impactful despite constraints.

The upcoming chapter will outline the research methodology employed to explore factors influencing women's progression into executive management at Gauteng's DID. Grounded in African feminist epistemology and postmodern feminist theory, it leverages qualitative narrative inquiry to capture rich, contextualised experiences of women senior managers. It details sampling, data collection, analysis, ethical considerations and validation strategies; emphasising reflexivity, participant agency and rigorous ethical research practices to ensure trustworthiness and meaningful insight.

3. Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This study explored the factors that influence the advancement of women into executive management positions within Gauteng's DID. By employing an African Feminist epistemology, it narrates the personal experiences, perspectives and contextual factors that affect women senior managers' ascension to higher levels of leadership within the department.

3.2 Research design and decisions

The methodological approach of this study aligns with Feminist and African Feminist perspectives, aiming to highlight the unique voices and agency of participants. African feminisms critique traditional academic norms, arguing for increased rigor, positionality, reflexivity and alternative data collection methods to enrich knowledge. This critique challenges the hegemonic discourse surrounding gender in management research (Limerick & O'Leary, 2006). The interpretivist management philosophy used here leverages qualitative methods; particularly narrative inquiry to acknowledge the researcher's subjective role in knowledge creation (Neuman, 2021).

Grounded in postmodern feminist theory, this study adopts the concept of nonunitary subjectivity, viewing selfhood as a dynamic process (Weedon, 1987; Smith, 1993). Unlike positivist paradigms, which portray researchers as detached, this approach underscores the value-laden and gendered nature of research (Saunders et al., 2020). The study followed an inductive approach, employing qualitative narrative inquiry to generate theoretical insights. A preliminary literature review informed the development of an interview guide and subsequent analyses has revisited the literature to ensure alignment with findings. The goal was to provide a holistic understanding of the experiences of women senior managers at the DID. By focusing on narratives that extend from just before their entry into senior management up to the interview, the research captures a contextualised view of their journeys (Chase, 2011).

3.3 Population

The study focused on women senior managers at the DID. Of the 55 SMS inclusive of both genders as of May 2025; 24 or 44% of the target population are women, with 15 Directors, five CDs, three DDGs and one at HoD level (DID, 2024 b) [Annexure 4].

Among them, two are from ethnic minority racial groups, while the majority of this population 98% identify as African (DID, 2024 b). This study focused on a sample of five women participants regardless of race. This sample includes women senior managers involved in various professions, including infrastructure development, maintenance, finance, property, the Expanded Public Works Programme [EPWP], Infrastructure Research, Planning and Systems [IRPS] and corporate services.

3.4 Sample and sampling method

The sample for this narrative inquiry consists of five participants, chosen to ensure diversity and depth rather than representativeness (Saunders et al., 2020). Participants were selected based on gender and their vocation as senior managers in level 13 and 14. Two sampling strategies have been employed; purposive self-selection and snowball sampling. Initially, potential participants were informed via email [Annexure 5] and text message, allowing them to volunteer. Following this, participants recommended others, expanding the pool (Noy, 2008). Snowball sampling is reliant on participant referrals and can introduce participants who are in close proximity to the referrers (Wagner et al., 2017), possibly introducing selection bias and network-bias (Hâncean, Lubbers2 & Molina, 2021).The sampling process concluded once five participants were obtained.

3.5 Research Instruments and data collection

In-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews were the primary data collection method. This approach fostered an egalitarian environment, empowering participants in the knowledge creation process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A preliminary literature review guided the development of the interview guide [Annexure 6] enabling flexibility in questioning to extract rich, meaningful data (Richie et al., 2013).

Interviews were conducted in settings chosen by participants to ensure the privacy and comfort of participants. The duration of each session was between 210-300 minutes. With permission [Annexure 7], interviews were audio recorded and transcribed totalling 197 pages of transcripts, supplemented by field notes and unstructured observations to enrich the data (Punch, 2014). The researcher maintained a reflective diary to document thoughts, reflections and emotional responses during data collection.

3.6 Data analysis strategies and interpretation

Data was analysed using thematic narrative analysis. Initial themes were noted in field observations and the reflective diary. The transcription process ensured alignment between oral and written soft data, preserving individual narratives while extracting themes and patterns relevant to the sample (Saunders et al., 2020).

3.7 Limitations

The study acknowledges potential limitations, such as the Hawthorne Effect, where participants alter behaviour due to awareness of observation (Sujatha et al., 2019). Building rapport helped mitigate this issue. The findings may not be generalisable to all public service contexts due to the specificity of the DID and the infrastructure sector; however, the study aimed to provide a rich, contextual understanding of women's experiences within this environment (Punch, 2014). Reliance on participants' memory presents another limitation. To enhance reliability, the researcher created timelines to cross-check recollections. Portelli (2009) emphasises that oral narratives vary with each telling, necessitating an integration of the researcher's reflections on identity and positionality in the analysis.

3.8 Transferability

This study generated a "rich, thick description" (Creswell & Poth, 2018), allowing readers to assess transferability based on the richness of the data, bolstered by detailed field notes and reflective journaling.

3.9 Truthfulness and validation

The study committed to a transparent research process. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest documenting key insights and disclosing biases to ensure validation. This qualitative study considered truthfulness and validation, which may be confirmed through the triangulation of several sources of data including of audio recordings, transcripts, field notes and informed consent documentation. The researcher discloses that their professional affiliation grants access to the purposive study population. This is counterbalanced by the study populations agency and right to reject or accept participation. The researcher's familiarity with the environment enhances understanding, while peer review was facilitated through the research supervisor.

3.10 Trustworthiness

This study committed to a research process that is fair, honest, truthful, confirmable, and unbiased. Aware of potential transference and countertransference, the researcher maintained reflexivity, recognising their privilege as both a woman and researcher with senior management experience. To mitigate bias, the researcher chose a study population which did not report to them and adhered to all access protocols as a student. The researcher positioned themself strictly as a researcher, openly acknowledging similarities and differences with participants and discussing these transparently. No third parties were present during interviews. Following Neuman's (2014) ethical guidance, the researcher avoided exploitation of participants. Participants were not compensated financially but all consented to audio recording and data use. This feminist approach embraces value-laden research rooted in women's experiences (Shipman, 1997).

To uphold confidentiality and in keeping with the African feminist praxis and reflexive foundation of this study, participants were invited to create their own pseudonyms. This was not merely a protective measure but a deliberate act of agency; allowing each woman to name herself, assert her identity and situate her voice within the research on her own terms, while remaining anonymous.

3.11 Ethical considerations

This research adhered to the Protection of Personal Information Act [POPI], ensuring responsible data management. Participant confidentiality is paramount, with identities known only to the researcher and supervisor.

Rigorous de-identification maintained confidentiality with self-selected pseudonyms used in reporting. De-identification, the process of removing or altering personal identifiers to prevent individual identification, is vital in feminist research to safeguard privacy and uphold ethics (Swales, 2021). It protects vulnerable groups, such as participants in this study, from further harm or stigmatisation (Harding, 2020). Rooted in a feminist ethic of care, this approach firmly prioritises the wellbeing of participants, minimising risk while pursuing scientific knowledge with a deep sense of responsibility and respect for participants; at the centre of the research (Franzke et al., 2020). De-identification disrupts power imbalances by anonymising marginalised voices

(Harding, 2020) and supports data justice by preventing the exploitation of sensitive data (Weinberg, 2020). Ultimately, it reflects a broader commitment to ethical, inclusive and socially responsible research.

This academic qualification is funded through a bursary from the DID, which imposes no restrictions on research topic, location, academic oversight or influence on the contents thereof. The contractual conditionalities hinge on the successful completion of the qualification within the prescribed timeframe and the adherence to a prescribed work-back period; failing which the bursary value must be repaid.

Permission has been obtained from the DID [Annexure 8] for onsite research. Written informed consent [Annexure 7] was secured from participants including permission for audio recording. The researcher acknowledges the right of participants to decline participation and committed to their welfare, pausing or terminating interviews if distress arose. An ethical clearance certificate was obtained from Wits Business School [Annexure 9].

3.12 Summary

This chapter outlines the study's feminist research methodology, grounded in African feminist epistemology, to explore the experiences of women senior managers in Gauteng's DID. Using qualitative narrative inquiry, it prioritises reflexivity, positionality, and ethical rigour. Five participants were purposively selected and rich, in-depth interviews were conducted and thematically analysed. The chapter discusses sampling, data collection, analysis and validation strategies, alongside ethical considerations, including confidentiality, de-identification and informed consent. Researcher reflexivity, trustworthiness and the value-laden nature of feminist inquiry are emphasised, affirming participant agency and ensuring responsible, non-exploitative knowledge production within a respectful and contextually grounded framework.

The forthcoming chapter introduces the study's five participants and presents key research findings. The chapter sets the stage for deeper qualitative analysis by providing individual participant backgrounds and contexts, which help frame their lived experiences within the broader structural challenges identified.

4.Chapter Four: Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

As at May 2025, the DID had 55 SMS. 31 or 56% male and 24 or 44% are female. The largest number of females were located in Director level with 15 females to 24 males. At CD level there were five females and six males. There were no persons of colour in the executive management. There were five persons of colour across the SMS. Two of the five were female (DID, 2025a).

According to the DID's EEA submission in form of EEA4 reports (2024b) the total remuneration for levels 13 and 14 was R 746 188 77. African males earned R41 065 500 against African females, R 23 851563. Coloured males earned R2 733 027 and Indian males R1 433 355 while coloured females R1 593 762 and Indian females R1 433 355. The total remuneration for persons of colour was R7 193 499. Across the SMS, men collectively earned over R45 200 00 while women earned just under R26.9 million. The average male salary stood at R1 460 000, while the average for females lagged behind at approximately R1 120 000. This translated into a gender pay gap of 23.2% less for females. African males earned nearly double the total of African females. Indian and Coloured females earned on par with their male counterparts on the same level.

Participants in this study were either Directors or CDs. They are aged between 35 to 65 years old, each of these five professionals has between three and 35 years of senior management experience. Academically distinguished, they hold NQF levels ranging from Bachelor to Master's degrees, with several boasting more than three qualifications. None were promoted internally, each was appointed from outside the organisation. Their annual remuneration spans from R1 217 000 to R1 717 000. All are parents, navigating the demands of leadership alongside personal realities; two in stable marriages or relationships, three amid relationship or marriage uncertainty or separation. See [Annexure 10] for a list of participants in the order they volunteered to participate in this study.

The forthcoming section will introduce and contextualise participants. Participants are identified by self-selected pseudonyms and are presented in the order they volunteered.

4.2 Overview and contextual background of participants

This section provides an overview and contextual background of the five participants involved in the study.

4.2.1 Mariah: Good enough for the work but not the title

Mariah is a seasoned public servant whose career spans multiple layers of government. She is grounded in a strong academic foundation and a resolute commitment to people-centred service. Her leadership is rooted in growth, transformation and a deep sense of purpose, all balanced with an unwavering dedication to family and community upliftment.

“I’m the type of person that values development,” Mariah reflects. “Success for me is about impact; what contribution have I made to your life to help you move forward?” This philosophy underpins her approach to leadership. It is measured not in titles, but in transformation. Whether improving processes or delivering services, she is driven by the question of how systems can better serve people. “We put processes in place and analyse and understand exactly where the issues are,” she says, speaking with the calm authority of someone who has led change from the ground up.

Beyond her formal roles, Mariah mentors’ young people, encouraging them to be intentional in their career paths and to strive for excellence. She has also created platforms for women to heal and grow. “True growth starts at the personal level,” she explains, recognising that professional success is hollow without personal grounding. For Mariah, faith, reflection and nurturing others are essential parts of leadership.

Yet even with her depth of experience and evident capability, Mariah has not been immune to the systemic barriers faced by women in leadership. “I was acting in the role for years but I wasn’t even shortlisted when the post was advertised,” she says. “It was given to a male who was less qualified than me.” Her experience, unfortunately, is not an isolated one. “You’re good enough to do the work but not good enough for the title or the pay.”

Working in a male-dominated environment has compounded these frustrations. “Even now at the DID, the opportunities don’t come to us. It’s always all male first, regardless of race, and then women.” The daily grind has left her with little time or space to focus

on her own growth. “You start meetings at 6 am and they run late into the evening. After those meetings, you’re often told that the report is due at 6 am the next morning, so you’re indirectly told not to sleep.”

Her honesty is disarming, especially when she reflects on how the system stifles potential. “Work is a waste of time. We wake up to repeat the same thing all the time. Lack of purpose, recycling the problem.” She adds, “There’s a culture here that prevents progress. The system itself is a barrier. Systems thinkers say that the objective of the system is to sustain itself. There is nothing I can do to change the system.”

Still, Mariah does not stop dreaming. “I need an exit strategy,” she declares. Her ambition is to contribute at a national level, to influence standards and shape the quality of public service. “I’m tired of sitting at platforms where you don’t contribute towards the narrative or have real influence. Where we’re not heard.” And yet, through it all, she continues to lead with conviction, with clarity and with care.

4.2.2 Margaret: System of selective protection and structural ceilings

Margaret is a resilient and principled public servant whose career spans across multiple departments and sectors. She is a matriarch and a caregiver, supporting atypical family members while simultaneously pursuing a higher NQF qualification. Her leadership is grounded in public value, people development and unwavering integrity.

“People often assume I’m not contributing,” she says calmly. “But when it comes to actual work, it’s me who develops them.” This quiet but impactful style of leadership often goes unrecognised and Margaret is candid about the exclusion she has faced throughout her career. “The development paths are not the same. Some men are protected; they’re moved strategically and placed where they’ll grow. But when it comes to others, especially women, they create structural blocks to keep you stuck. If you're not aligned with their agenda, you're left in one position until you decide to leave on your own.”

Despite successfully delivering results and passing audits, she often finds her efforts ignored or attributed to others. “In practice, I feel like I’m just collecting a salary. I’m

disengaged. I often find myself bored and detached, sometimes not even listening in meetings. I believe that's due to the trauma I've experienced. It's like I'm emotionally shut down." The environment at senior management level, she notes, is deeply toxic. "It's hostile and not safe. Agendas are pushed and there's no trust. You fear speaking out because of possible retaliation. There's no compassion or humanity. It's all about removing people. It's systemic and endorsed from the top."

She is forthright about the gendered barriers that continue to undermine leadership development. "There's a structural ceiling. Promotions are driven by motives, not merit." Even when women do break through, she explains, the support they receive is conditional. "I'm looking for a job that comes with a promotion. I want to advance the knowledge I have. Right now, I'm facing stagnation. That's why I'm furthering my qualifications. I want to relate what's happening inside with the world outside."

Her most recent redeployment was deeply demoralising. "I was moved without consultation. There was no onboarding, no communication. I was excluded from meetings." The stress led to hospitalisation for major depression and sensory impairment "No one even acknowledged it when I returned," she says quietly. Still, Margaret holds fast to her purpose. "Even in the face of exclusion, I remain steadfast." Her vision is clear. She hopes to contribute at a national level, where experience, ethical leadership and humanity are not only valued but expected.

4.2.3 Mapholba: Once you join the DID you stagnate and regress

"I'm an acquired taste. I'm no longer going to put myself in a position where I constantly have to prove myself to anyone." With this powerful declaration, Mapholba, a seasoned professional with a strong background outside the public service, encapsulates a profound shift in mindset. She has not been satisfied with her progression at the DID, "Since I joined the DID it feels like someone removed the wheels, slammed on the brakes. I'm trying to walk the car forward with my feet". A mother and family-centred leader, she is now actively prioritising inner peace, autonomy and personal integrity over traditional career aspirations.

"I no longer have aspirations within the public service," she admits. Frustrated by chaotic internal politics and a stagnant professional culture, "once you join the DID,

you stagnate. You even regress," she has set her sights on a Chief Operating Officer [COO] role in a more structured and progressive environment.

Yet her contributions have been significant. "One of my proudest achievements has been leading teams from mediocre to exceptional performance," she says, having brought visibility and systems thinking to a neglected division. Her strategic leadership aligned internal teams and external stakeholders, creating a foundation for credible service delivery. Mapholba's leadership philosophy is rooted in empathy and trust. "I don't micromanage. I care about my team as human beings first," she states. Still, she doesn't feel equally respected by senior leadership, "I am valued only for the outputs I deliver, not as a person."

Her gendered critique of the SMS is sobering: "It is a Boys' Club... We've lost the will to appoint women in senior roles." Despite her credibility she describes herself, "I'm like that tool in the toolbox you reach for when you're in trouble" yet recognition remains absent.

Mapholba's journey is one of resilience, clarity and unshakable dignity. She no longer begs to be seen. She delivers, she leads, and she walks away, whole and unbroken.

4.2.4 Kia: I don't want the degradation

Kia is a seasoned and deeply resilient public servant. Her influence has been shaped not only by time but by enduring grit, care and clarity of purpose. A woman of quiet strength, Kia brings to her work a complexity grounded in lived experience, personal sacrifice and deep institutional knowledge.

Professionally headhunted into senior management through cadre deployment, Kia's rise was no accident. She stepped into leadership during a period of instability, managing "broken systems" while two male directors engaged in a power struggle. "I just stepped in quietly and did the work," she says, describing her calm but assertive intervention. Self-taught in government finance and systems, she became a respected and effective leader.

However, Kia's career has also been marked by deep institutional betrayal linked to sexual harassment. She endured politically motivated enforcement processes "without

legal standing," leading to emotional collapse, financial devastation and the erosion of her family's support. "I wasn't ok for a very long time," she reflects. Yet even then, she found healing through action. Building a road in her rural village "probably saved me," she explains, a literal act of repair during a time of personal disintegration.

Her personal life, too, offered little relief. Isolated by a disengaged partner during her lowest professional moments, Kia turned inward. "I think I'm more measured. I protect myself. I don't let people in easily anymore." This isolation forged a sharper, more reflective leadership style; one marked by empathy, discernment and quiet authority.
Kia's life extends far beyond her job title. She is a family genealogist, hairdresser, florist and caretaker. She rejects offers of executive roles that compromise her integrity. "I don't want the degradation." Instead, she leads with conviction: "If you don't want people to be afraid, then don't lead with fear."

4.2.5 Nancy: DID is not my company - they will replace me

Nancy is a seasoned public servant whose career spans across the private sector and government. With technical depth, a sharp intellect and unwavering personal values, she has emerged as a principled leader who values truth over title and purpose over position.

Her dynamic career reflects a restless intellect. "I get bored easily," she admits, describing her progression from the private sector into various public roles. Appointed as senior manager, she later chose to withdraw. "I had to take a step down to grow," she explains. "That crowd, the SMT [Senior Management Team] and EMT [Executive Management Team], was really inhibiting my growth. I don't want to be a DDG," citing the politics and lack of objectivity at that level.

Nancy's leadership style is marked by trust, output and high standards. "I'm the opposite of a micromanager. I'm an output-driven leader." Yet her independence and honesty often made her a misfit in rigid bureaucratic environments. "Without my values, I'm nothing," she says. Her time in SMS left emotional scars. "It took away my drive. It started to affect my confidence. I was depressed."

The toll extended to her personal life. "It affected my relationship, my children. I had to go for therapy." In time, she regained perspective. "The DID is not my company. If I

die, they'll replace me." This realisation sparked a shift: her focus is now firmly on her health, family and meaningful contribution.

Today, Nancy is "the happiest [she's] ever been." She remains involved through professional bodies and envisions a future as a COO in the infrastructure sector. "Opportunities now seek me," she says, grounded, fulfilled and clear on what truly matters.

4.3 Thematic Analysis

This section will present and contextualise the five participants who form the basis of this study. The forthcoming section will disaggregate the data gleaned from the soft data into the four focal points of this study; examining the organisational and personal factors which influence women's progression into executive matters. The later analysis will delve into the lived experiences of ethnic minority women and investigate the inhibitors of their advancement into executive management.

4.4 Organisational factors which influence women's progression into executive management

Organisational structures and cultures continue to obstruct women's advancement into executive management through deeply embedded mechanisms of exclusion and control. The dual phenomena of the glass ceiling and glass cliff reflect how women are both denied upward mobility and strategically positioned in precarious, high-risk roles devoid of institutional support. Participants' professional credibility is routinely undermined through intellectual erasure, marginalisation and exclusionary decision-making. Moreover, sexual harassment and verbal abuse are normalised as instruments of organisational discipline, reinforcing gendered power hierarchies. These dynamics expose a systemic pattern of institutional violence that not only silences dissent but also consolidates male-dominated leadership norms within executive spaces.

4.4.1 Recognition, credibility and professional value: The invisible battle for acknowledgement

Across the narratives, participants describe persistent struggles to have their expertise, contributions and leadership recognised within a system that frequently diminishes or appropriates their value.

4.4.2 Glass Ceiling

Margaret states, “I’ve been a senior manager forever and I’m still here. There’s a structural ceiling.” Her remark points directly to the enduring, invisible barriers that constrain upward mobility, regardless of professional experience or academic qualifications. Similarly, Mariah expressed:

> No personal growth, no financial growth, nothing. But I’m invisible unless they need a scapegoat.” She further reflects: I lost interest when decisions were made without considering the facts. When we were given information but then went in the opposite direction, that’s when I became frustrated. I’ve been in situations where I would refer back to the facts and say, here’s the evidence. Let’s deal with this. But people didn’t want to engage with the evidence and that’s when things became difficult.

These statements illuminate how professional expertise is routinely disregarded, resulting in career stagnation and a deep sense of professional disillusionment.

4.4.3 Glass cliff

Mapholba introduces the metaphor of the toolbox to describe her experience: “I’m like that tool in a toolbox you reach for when you’re in trouble.” This resonates strongly with the concept of the glass cliff, where women are elevated into unstable or doomed roles, often in crisis situations and set up to fail. She continues, “I was given a project everyone knows is a non-starter… If I fail, they’ll point fingers.”

Nancy corroborates this view:

> Women in SMS are set up to fail… the projects they give you… it's not necessarily for you to succeed… just so that you can be shamed and softened.

These insights reveal a deliberate use of project assignments as a form of organisational control, where failure is both anticipated and exploited to maintain existing power structures.

4.4.4 Glass cliff & glass ceiling intersection

Mariah voices this precariousness: “No, I don’t feel safe... we are waiting for something to push us out of the system.” Women are appointed to risky roles without support,

while upward mobility is blocked by the glass ceiling, as Margaret explains with "structural ceiling." Mapholba, "But this work is outside my profession, beyond my capabilities. I tried to refuse but was told thou shalt do it! So, I'm muddling through. I think others were scared to fail, so they handed it to me. If I fail, they'll point fingers." Mariah, "I feel that the system is working so hard to get me out of the system. I have to do everything they give to me regardless of my workload or resource constraints." Kia, "There's no way of feeling safe in this place." Nancy, "It's not just about the decisions. It's the tone. The way they look at you like you don't belong. They belittle you to remind you of your place."

This intersection of the glass ceiling and glass cliff reveals a deeply entrenched, gendered organisational culture that both restricts participant's upward mobility and exposes them to heightened risk and scrutiny. Participants are appointed to high-stakes roles lacking sufficient support or resources [glass cliff], while systemic barriers [glass ceiling] prevent them from progressing further.

Mariah and Kia describe a hostile environment where participants feel unsafe and overburdened, expected to overperform without protection. Mapholba's coerced acceptance of tasks beyond her scope highlights how participants are set up to absorb failure, used as buffers in crisis. Margaret's term "structural ceiling" underscores the institutionalised nature of these barriers. Nancy's reflection adds a layer of psychological marginalisation, where participants are subtly devalued and excluded.

Together, these testimonies illustrate an organisation where participants are simultaneously blocked from advancement and exposed to risk. They are held responsible without authority and made visible only when there is something to lose.

4.4.5 Sexual harassment, verbal abuse, intellectual erasure & exclusion

Kia, Nancy, Mariah's and Margaret's experiences demonstrates that sexual harassment, verbal abuse, intellectual erasure and exclusion are not isolated behaviours. They are deployed as mechanisms of political dominance and social punishment.

Kia recounted her experiences of sexual harassment with a politician:

> I was asked to present a Strategy. But when I got to the [meeting venue], it was just him - the venue was completely empty. He was prancing around, trying to stretch out the interaction… I realised I had to leave. I said, Here's your document. I'm done. I walked away. After that, a whole sequence of disciplinary action unfolded. I was punished for saying no!

The abuse did not end there. Kia adds concurrent sexual harassment by an executive manager:

> He followed me out of the dinner and tried to enter my room. A colleague stopped him. That's what power looks like here. If you resist, they isolate you. They remove you from meetings, teams, even your work." She reflects further on the emotional and psychological toll: "It creates a lot of anxiety because you do think that this person has the power to do other things that hurt you… Coming to terms with it was not easy. Because you question yourself, the question, would it have been easier for me to just go along with this? Because the lead-up to the sanctions after both incidents made me understand that my refusal was the reason that this was happening.

Nancy adds another layer, noting the systemic nature of the abuse:

> Sex for jobs is... is literally endemic. Look, I've been in situations where people will be explicit to say I'm not going to renew your contract. Let's talk about it. You'll tell me where we'll meet and then I'll sign. I did not have work in the province for a while because I refused. Then, at DID, I've also had people refuse to sign my performance agreements because I've refused to engage in sex.

Mariah shares her own experience of verbal abuse:

> He [manager] pointed at me and screamed at me saying who do I think I am?… I didn't report it. Why must I do that? Nothing will happen!

This gendered coercion is compounded by intellectual erasure according to Nancy:

> People listen attentively and the next thing is being pitched in your absence. It's a culture. DID is a poachers' paradise. They take your ideas and sell them. There's no shame!

Margaret experienced systemic exclusion and isolation when forcibly moved to a new portfolio:

> To make matters worse, the entire team went on leave shortly after I joined and no one was available to onboard me. I later learned I was being deliberately sidelined. When my boss arrived, they refused to work with me. The working environment deteriorated quickly.

These accounts show how sexual and verbal abuse coupled with intellectual theft and exclusion are instrumentalised within professional settings to delegitimise, isolate and silence women in SMS. Verbal, sexual and institutional abuse function as tools of discipline to marginalise women who resist compliance or visibility. The normalisation of such behaviours reflects how violence is woven into the structure of organisational power.

4.5 Personal factors which influence women's progression into executive management

Women's progression into executive management is profoundly shaped by personal burdens that intersect with institutional neglect. Participants navigate chronic burnout, caregiving overload and inadequate partner support, all while managing relentless professional expectations. Emotional resilience emerges as both a survival strategy and a form of silent resistance, as women self-censor, withdraw and conform to oppressive norms. Many adopt quiet rebellion; redefining success through personal growth, wellness and autonomy rather than institutional approval. These adaptive strategies reflect the psychological cost of leadership under gendered strain and reveal how women reclaim agency in environments where systemic structures fail to accommodate or recognise their full human realities.

4.5.1 Burnout, caregiving and the double burden

Participants face burnout as they juggle caregiving and professional demands, with little institutional support for their dual roles.

Kia reveals how family responsibilities are assumed without question:

> I've taken over a lot of responsibility in the family… It fell into my lap. And work doesn't care. They act like I have no life.

Nancy highlights the unrealistic expectations placed on women leaders: "A homemaker can't be 24/7 with you as an executive. But this job demands everything."

Mariah voices the emotional cost of this imbalance:

> I'm sacrificing my children... Even my own time is gone... I can't go to the gym... Exercise helps me de-stress... I can't even do that.

Mapholba's experience adds a relational dimension, as work strain disrupts her presence at home and tests her family's patience:

> I wasn't present for my child. My partner was supportive but frustrated. We even considered me changing jobs.

These narratives depict the unsustainable cost of carrying multiple roles without adequate support.

4.5.2 Conditional or limited partner support

Participants express frustration at unequal partner support, which is often conditional, limited or inconsistent.

Kia describes a partner whose quiet lack of investment contrasts sharply with her ambitions:

> He wasn't very vocal about it but his actions spoke volumes... It's hard when you're climbing up and someone else isn't as invested.

Nancy explains that support hinges on traditional roles - once boundaries blur, support diminishes:

> The support goes in such a way that I must understand my role as a partner and mother... The minute it starts to overstep into a personal life... Then it becomes less acceptable and he is less supportive.

Mariah recalls little to no encouragement or care during illness:

> I don't even remember him supporting me… He wouldn't ask me about my goals. When I'm sick, he tells the children to be quite and not bother me but every minute, he [partner] will be the one coming to ask me something.

Margaret highlights emotional absence and minimal involvement, especially during critical times like education or health crises:

> He's not there for me. If he wants something, he waits until I'm asleep. The kids pass on his messages. When I did my second qualification… he vanished again -working elsewhere.

Mapholba shares a more supportive partnership, with her partner actively helping and championing her career:

> He's very supportive towards me and towards my career. He's always championed me. When our child was sick, my partner would bring clothes, food and relieve me when I needed a break. But he won't sleep in a hospital.

While Mapholba experiences comparatively better partner support, it still stops short of fully sharing caregiving burdens. Margaret's account introduces more complex relational dynamics, including emotional absence and health-related caregiving.

4.5.3 Emotional resilience, coping and self-management

In response to pervasive abuse and exclusion, participants describe a range of emotional and behavioural strategies to survive in their work environments. To protect their psychological wellbeing, participants engage in subversion in the form of strategic silence. Mapholba notes: "I don't speak unless I have an agenda item." Kia similarly shares: "I've learned to speak when it's worth it and not to speak when it's not." Nancy reflects on her own withdrawal: "It shifted simply because… I just felt… it's not received well… so I decided to take a step back". Mariah admits: "I self-censor in meetings… I can sit through an entire meeting and say nothing."

Margaret describes a significant loss of confidence:

> I have no confidence in this department. I no longer have public speaking confidence either. They've broken me down. When I speak, I feel exposed. If I say anything in meetings, it might reveal how absent my boss has been and I'm not willing to take that risk.

These accounts highlight the emotional labour required to endure such environments and position resilience as both a coping mechanism and a form of resistance.

4.5.4 Strategic resistance and quiet rebellion

Despite the toxic environment, participants describe subtle but powerful forms of resistance aimed at reclaiming agency and self-preservation.

4.5.5 Conforming to survive

Participants often must conform and mask their true selves, adopting survival strategies to navigate exclusionary workplace cultures.

Nancy explains that survival in leadership means adopting the dominant culture:

> Women have had to adopt that culture of survival. You look around and the only ones still here are the ones who learned how to play the game.

Kia expands on this, describing how women change their behaviour based on the audience:

> We are learning how to navigate around all the perceptions of how we are supposed to be. You show up differently depending on who's in the room. That's not growth. That's survival.

Mapholba shares the personal cost: becoming someone she is not:

> I became someone I wasn't, just to survive. My natural self is not rewarded here. I had to pretend become less assertive, more apologetic. And even then, it's not enough.

Participants' experiences underscore the emotional dissonance required to "fit in" and survive in leadership environments shaped by gendered expectations

4.5.6 Beyond this “mess”: Subversion & redefining success

Participants describe deliberate withdrawal as both a survival tactic and a quiet act of agency manifesting as subversion.

Kia explains: “I just made the decision to stop fighting and focus on self-preservation”.

Nancy shares that she changed the way she responded to work demands:

> It was the best decision I could have made in my life. I stopped volunteering. I stopped trying to belong. I stopped going to Sunday meetings. What is it that you will do on a Sunday that you can't do on a Monday morning? I just think it's crazy. I explore my wellness interests. I embrace that space. And I go deep into that space of wellness and healing. And yeah, that journey fulfils me even religiously.

Participants redefine success beyond institutional measures, instead framing it through autonomy, peace and spiritual or personal development. Mariah:

> We just don’t care. We just don’t care. That’s our power now. I can go and look for a contract… R2 500 per hour. That’s the plan now.”

Mapholba is intentional about the change that she wants to effect:

> I’ve enrolled in religious college. It’s grounding me. That’s leadership too. Last year, I started aggressively applying. I put in about four applications. This year, after speaking with my Coach, I realised I need to work on personal development, particularly social intelligence. At this level, you must navigate things carefully. I’m developing myself and getting psychologically ready. If an opportunity came up, I’d take it, but I’m not aggressively looking. When I finally stopped working the punishing hours, I saw how dysfunctional it had been. I’m much happier now. I noticed my child didn’t even recognise me until late last year. Now, they come to me, tell me stories and seek me out. That connection means everything. I’ve stopped doing afterhours work and attending Sunday meetings. I refused. I’ve learned to say no.

Margaret is furthering her academic qualifications: “Studying. Giving myself an intentional topic, that helps me understand policies and see beyond this mess.”

These narratives illustrate the agency of participants demonstrated via a shift away from institutional validation toward self-determined trajectories.

4.6 Experiences of ethnic minority women

Ethnic minority women face entrenched structural and cultural barriers that systematically undermine their progression into executive management. A pervasive Boys’ Club culture, reinforced through informal networks, political patronage and performative gender inclusion, entrenches male dominance and marginalises women - particularly those from underrepresented ethnic or cultural groups. Participants report exclusionary leadership practices, inequitable workload distribution, and differential treatment based on gender and perceived cultural “fit.” Even under female leadership, patriarchal norms persist. Advancement is frequently contingent not on merit but on personal alliances and conformity. These intersecting dynamics expose how race, gender and politics coalesce to sustain institutionalised exclusion and obstruct leadership equity.

4.6.1 Toxic workplace culture, gender barriers and political dynamics

The narratives from participants reveal a deeply entrenched culture of gendered exclusion within the DID, where participants face systemic barriers that hinder their professional advancement and well-being.

4.6.2 The Boys’ Club and weaponised abuse

Workplace environments emerge as deeply gendered and politically charged, with cultures of exclusion, favouritism and systemic abuse that serve to maintain male dominance while punishing female resistance. Participants describe an enduring male-dominated workplace culture, often sustained even under female leadership.

Margaret articulates this directly:

> There is definitely a Boys’ Club culture. Some people are protected, especially those with relationships at higher levels. This club uses informal networks to shield perpetrators and exclude women.

Mapholba echoes this sentiment:

> Even under a female executive manager. It remains a Boys' Club. The most qualified people often don't get appointed… a woman is sent in to clean up the mess.

Nancy offers a nuanced perspective: "DID is a Boys' Club open to some women by invitation… you're part of the Boys' Club, but in a different way; to serve a purpose." Mariah reinforces the perception of performative gender inclusion: "I do believe the environment operates like a Boys' Club, even with a female executive manager - she behaves more like one of the boys." Kia adds: "We have a Boys' Club. We've got a female executive manager but she's still managed by a man somewhere." Mariah further reflects: "DID culture is unique. It means that to maintain my seat, I had to work 300 times more than my male counterparts."

4.6.3 Structural Career Barriers

Workplace insecurity is exacerbated by gendered abuse and institutional neglect, leaving participants vulnerable to marginalisation and career derailment. Mapholba reveals: "Here [DID] if someone is not doing the work, they [executive managers] move the work to someone else. The system overloads the overperformers and does not reward them."

Mariah highlights the harsh double standards participants face:

> Males are always respected. When a female presents, the feedback tone is different, almost like you're stupid. The tone is always high-pitched. You're getting whipped!

Kia echoes this, describing how male and female senior managers receive vastly different treatment from leadership:

> When MEC chairs there is a difference when male and female SMS present or ask questions. MEC will not use words like 'That's not true' with the males. But with women, he will openly say it. If a male DDG presents and there is poor progress but attributes poor progress to external factors, the MEC will not

> comment. However, when a female presents citing external factors, the MEC will immediately question her on how the measures she put in place to mitigate those external factors. You can see the comments that come from the MEC when women SMS speak. He puts poor value in the contribution of women. The executive manager has a slight social thing about how they responds to male SMS which could be based on their tradition and or religious beliefs.

Mapholba adds layers of exclusion based on ethnicity, gender and cultural fit, underscoring the compounded barriers women face:

> Firstly, I'm the wrong ethnicity. Secondly, I'm the wrong gender. And thirdly, I don't fit the culture.

Nancy points out that political alignment and favouritism determine who advances, leaving many women participants invisible:

> It depends who the executive manager is. You'll find some groups are prioritised, others are invisible. And women who don't align politically? They don't stand a chance.

Mariah sums it up, revealing a system driven by personal relationships and a Boys' Club mentality:

> When it comes to women in senior management, it's not about the work you produce. It's about personal encounters. If I like you, you'll move up… People who are liked, get projects, get support, get clarity on who to talk to. Some people are just smooth talkers and they get by. It's like a Boys' Club.

These narratives expose the institutionalisation of intersectional discrimination and its role in reinforcing exclusionary power structures.

4.7 Inhibitors of advancement

Women's advancement into executive management is actively obstructed by institutional sabotage, political gatekeeping and gendered leadership norms. Appointments are often performative, with preselection, patronage and loyalty superseding merit. A lack of mentorship, coaching, sponsorship and training creates

a missing ladder that renders upward mobility inaccessible. Leadership remains coded in a masculine register, punishing women for embodying the very assertiveness expected of leaders. The Queen Bee Syndrome and fractured sisterhood further entrench isolation and competition. These systemic inhibitors not only stall careers but exact a profound emotional, physical and psychological toll - transforming leadership into a space of chronic survival rather than empowerment.

4.7.1 Institutional sabotage and stalled progression

Systemic barriers both overt and covert prevent participant's upward mobility, eroding trust in the DID's organisational fairness and meritocracy:

4.7.2 Patronage, preselection and political gatekeeping

Leadership is often performative, constrained by patronage, gatekeeping and preselection, where loyalty is rewarded and merit is systematically sidelined.
For Kia, appointments are politically driven and reduced to box-ticking exercises:

> Public service appointments are fraught with political interference... the job was advertised for compliance.

Nancy underscores how progression rewards compliance over competence:

> Progression is not about skill. It is about being a walkover… a yes person. I've seen excellent women passed over because they refuse to be subservient.

Margaret echoes this, describing recruitment as performative with outcomes pre-decided:

> They advertise, but they already know who's getting the position. It's a performance. A façade.

Mariah adds that, despite doing the work, recognition and progress remain out of reach:

> There is a lot of injustice... From the time I joined the DID, I've had to learn how to do the work with little progress or recognition... The system itself is a barrier.

Participants consistently speak of occupying leadership positions with no real authority, protection or institutional support. Power becomes symbolic rather than substantive, with the burden of responsibility but no autonomy.

4.7.3 The missing ladder: Lack of mentorship and growth

Over the years the DID has had 20 internal promotions within the SMS (DID, 2025b). Twelve promotions have been male with eight females. All participants in this study have been recruited from outside the DID and none have been promoted internally. Additionally, none of the participants have been trained, mentored, coached or sponsored by the DID nor have they furthered their academic qualifications through internal bursaries or personal finance.

Mariah's frustration with the lack of formal training reflects a deeper systemic neglect:

> I haven't been on training from the time I started here. I have put in several requests but nothing has been approved. And I know it's deliberate.

Nancy shares a similar experience:

> No mentorship, no coaching, no promotions, no programmes. You stagnate and then they ask why you're not ready.

Mapholba adds that when opportunities do arise, they are often exploitative:

> Opportunities are mentioned only when someone wants to use you. It's not about development - it's about delegating undesirable work and dressing it up.

The participants accounts reveal a pattern of organisational neglect that stifles development while masking it as personal inadequacy. At the DID, eight out of 20 promoted employees are women, this 40% representation indicates some progress. However, women frequently encounter biases in which their suitability for leadership is judged against masculine norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lyness & Heilman, 2006). They also tend to receive feedback that highlights interpersonal strengths rather than leadership potential. This can negatively influence promotion outcomes (Heilman, 2001). The DID has not developed adequate bench strength for women in the senior management to progress to executive management.

4.7.4 Performing power in a masculine register

This sub-theme analyses how leadership remains encoded in a masculine register, rewarding emotional suppression, assertiveness and dominance - traits long associated with patriarchal ideals. Women navigating this terrain face an entrenched paradox; they must demonstrate authority within a structure that punishes them for exhibiting the very traits it demands.

This context provides fertile ground for the Queen Bee Syndrome (Staines et al., 1973; Mathur-Helm, 2005) where some women in senior roles, having succeeded by aligning with dominant masculine norms, may consciously or unconsciously distance themselves from other women. This distancing is not necessarily an innate disposition but often a survival strategy in a system that tolerates only a narrow version of female success. When Mariah states, "As a senior manager, you don't have decision-making power... Everyone directs," it reveals how constrained leadership roles can be particularly for women. In such positions, aligning with the existing masculine power structure may feel like the only route to legitimacy or influence.

Nancy's observation that leadership culture is "very male" points to the expectation that women must assimilate rather than transform executive norms. As women rise through the ranks, they encounter likeability penalties for asserting themselves in ways expected of leaders. The quote from Kia encapsulates the resulting double bind: "You're not supposed to raise your voice... too soft... too hard... There's no right way." This no-win scenario reflects the likeability bias. Women must be assertive to be perceived as competent yet are penalised for such behaviour because it contravenes gender norms.

In response, some women may strategically suppress emotions, remain silent or refrain from affiliating with other women, reproducing Queen Bee behaviours not out of malice but as a means of surviving in a hostile structure. This internalised compliance further entrenches the masculine status quo and isolates other women seeking advancement.

By framing leadership as a performance within a masculine script and integrating Queen Bee Syndrome and likeability bias, it becomes clear that women in SMS roles are not only contending with external stereotypes but also complex intra-gender

dynamics and systemic constraints. This creates a leadership landscape where performing power demands not just competence but a finely tuned emotional calibration and sometimes, a painful disavowal of solidarity.

4.7.5 Fractured Sisterhood and Gendered Competition

While shared gendered experiences might be expected to foster solidarity, participants describe a competitive atmosphere among women, shaped by scarcity and systemic pressure. Nancy observes: “Women almost want you to suffer as well. They think, ‘I went through this - so should you”. Kia similarly notes: “Support is not as widespread as we would hope.”

This sub-theme points to internalised patriarchal norms and organisational cultures that reward individual endurance over collective empowerment. The intersection of emotional resilience, lack of safety and fractured sisterhood in the workplace reveals a complex landscape where women navigate systemic barriers, gendered expectations and emotional tolls. These survival strategies, while adaptive, highlight the need for structural change to foster genuine inclusion and support for women in leadership roles.

4.7.6 Emotional, physical and psychological cost of staying

Participants offer stark accounts of how enduring toxic leadership and institutional neglect affects their health, identity and sense of self.

4.7.6.1 Leadership as illness

Leadership is often seen as strength, but for many, it comes at a deep personal cost. Nancy, Mapholba, Margaret and Mariah reveal how toxic expectations can erode health, peace and purpose. Leadership as illness explores how systems of power can turn leadership into a source of harm.

For Nancy, the pressure became so severe it affected her physical and mental health:

> I was sick to a point where I was taking a lot of sick leave but also having to see a psychologist. It was just to unsettle, break… directly impacting my health, my mental state.

Mapholba echoes this, describing overwhelming anxiety:

> It cost me my peace. I was anxious all the time. I ended up in emergency care. They said it was stress-related. And I still went back to work the next week.

Margaret highlights the emotional damage of constant judgment and the risks of speaking out:

> It's hostile and not safe. The one-sided judgement demoralises you. And when you try to speak out, you're marked.

Mariah adds the exhaustion of impossible workloads and eroded personal time:

> I don't have time to pick up my kids on time. You start meetings at 6 am and they run late into the evening. Then you are allocated tasks which means you're indirectly told not to sleep... I don't think I am still at the right place and I will not achieve my goals.

Leadership is not portrayed as a role of empowerment but as a space of intense personal cost. The dominant narrative is one of survival, enduring psychological distress, systemic exclusion and moral injury while attempting to fulfil professional responsibilities.

4.7.6.2 Psychological toll of harassment

Harassment in leadership spaces inflicts a deep psychological toll, where survival demands emotional labour, forced resilience and constant self-protection.

Nancy captures the personal impact of workplace harassment: "It was just to unsettle, break… directly impacting my health, my mental state."

Mariah offers a broader institutional perspective:

> We don't promote women senior managers from inside. We bring them from outside. This is a toxic place. Recently, two senior managers had to be taken away by ambulances… If you don't find a way to release anger and pressure, it will consume you.

Mapholba illustrates the daily grind of this emotional burden:

> I worked late into the night, even weekends. The HoD would send me feedback at 9pm, expecting changes by morning. It was unfair. I had done my work. My social life vanished. I couldn't say no. But I realised I was allowing it. Eventually, I set boundaries. I'd say, I'm at school. If you need anything, work with my schedule.

These accounts underline the emotional labour required to endure such environments and position resilience as both a coping mechanism and a form of resistance and subversion.

4.8 Further insights from participants

Participants in this study navigate a professional landscape that is far from linear. It is less a career ladder and more a complex labyrinth, riddled with institutional betrayal, invisible ceilings, steep cliffs and weaponised abuse.

Within the DID, recognition is strategically rationed. Safety remains conditional and progress is systematically controlled by deeply entrenched gendered, racialised and political hierarchies. The metaphors evoked by the participants themselves: Toolbox, Survivor and Animal Kingdom are not simply rhetorical devices. They serve as conceptual frameworks that expose an organisational ecology structured not only to challenge but to erode.

Mapholba's Tool Box:

> I'm like that tool in the toolbox you reach for when you're in trouble. I feel like a tool in someone's arsenal, pulled out when needed. I don't know what that says about my value, but I do know I have credibility. People know that if they want a specific output or a certain standard of work, they'll get it from me. But in some ways, I feel used, especially when there's work that must be done properly. Even if it's not within my scope, it's still given to me. It's like doing X's work, I have to do it because I'm trusted to do it better than others, like X, for instance. Even if I've already got something on my plate, the task will still come to me because they know I'll deliver. So yes, my work ethic is recognised, but I'm not

> sure it aligns with the culture of the organisation anymore. I think they've realised that my personality wouldn't allow me to be involved in anything unethical. So, they've decided where I fit in.

The organisational culture described here is extractive, hierarchical and morally ambiguous. It celebrates output while isolating ethical actors from influence. Recognition is tactical, not transformative. Trust is used to justify overwork and ethical consistency becomes a reason to limit scope, not expand leadership. The metaphor of the "tool in the toolbox" reflects a deeper institutional view of people as interchangeable and instrumental, reinforcing a culture of utility over humanity.

Kia's Survivor:

> Do you know the Survivor series? There's a social game, performance game and a game on how you manipulate people. I equate our working environment to that. In Survivor's tasks to win immunity, I feel that in our environment that validation on working hard and achieving doesn't necessarily always come. I feel that our social game because of our social construct; men have an easier way of being obnoxious socially but if I was to do the same as C does, in the way that he speaks, I would be viewed as totally unacceptable. In fact, I would be viewed as the stereotype of a wayward, crude, raw and rough woman. There are different levels of acceptance for males and females. How it relates to our work environment is the social game, is how you play nicely with the powers that be and suck up and do the dirty work gets you further along. M is a typical example. He is lazy and does nothing all day but his social game is brilliant. He has aligned himself to the executive manager so much so that they do not isolate him for poor performance. That social game that we play is very important. The manipulation is how someone is able to use the social game to manipulate those in power to view those downstream. The manipulators also offer value to those on top by appointing X service provider. This results in gaining political capital and influence. Women don't play the social and manipulation game as well as men. We are perceived as being softer or risk being negatively typecast if we join that game. Being brass and rude is allowed for men but not for women.

Kia's comparison of the DID workplace to Survivor reveals an organisational culture dominated by social manipulation, political alignment and gendered double standards. Success is not rooted in performance, but in strategic relationships with power. Men benefit from leniency and social boldness, while women risk being typecast if they behave similarly. Kia notes that validation for hard work is rare, while manipulation and compliance are rewarded. The culture privileges image over merit and normalises gender bias, where traits seen as assertive in men are condemned in women. Ultimately, the environment fosters survival through politics rather than ethical performance or professional excellence.

Nancy uses the vivid Animal Kingdom metaphor to characterise DID's organisational culture:

> Animal Kingdom? You know those animals that feed off a carcass? Hyena's? That's DID culture. It is just something else. Honestly. it's like watching Animal Kingdom on Discovery Channel, where people [SMS] are just hyenas feeding off a dead carcass. They don't even make that kill, but they're around to eat. Actually, everyone is just pulling whatever it is that they can for themselves. That's DID culture. It's a survivalist kind of culture and it's brutal.

Nancy's depiction of the organisational culture as an "Animal Kingdom" reveals a brutal, survivalist environment marked by opportunism and self-interest. The metaphor of hyenas feeding off a carcass reflects a workplace where individuals benefit from others' efforts without contributing meaningfully. There is no collective accountability or collaboration - only a scramble for personal gain. This imagery illustrates a toxic culture driven by competition, resource hoarding and predatory behaviour. Trust and integrity are absent, replaced by a ruthless ethos where survival depends on exploiting whatever advantage one can find. Nancy's account highlights the deep ethical and structural decay within the organisation.

Finally, the DID organisational culture, as captured through Mapholba's "Toolbox", Kia's "Survivor" and Nancy's "Animal Kingdom" metaphors, is extractive, hierarchical and profoundly unethical. Individuals are valued for utility, not humanity - used when convenient and discarded when inconvenient. Recognition is transactional, granted not for integrity or competence, but for alignment with informal power structures. Kia's account exposes a system where manipulation and image-management outweigh

genuine performance, while Nancy reveals a predatory ecosystem devoid of collaboration or accountability. These metaphors though unique to each participant; converge in portraying a workplace defined by survivalism, moral compromise and institutional betrayal. Women who exhibit ethical consistency or resist exploitation are sidelined, while those who conform to toxic norms are protected or rewarded. Trust becomes a burden and credibility results in overwork without advancement. Together, these narratives lay bare a culture that not only fails to support its members but actively undermines justice, equity and collective well-being. The DID thrives on erosion, not empowerment.

4.9 Discussion

This study reveals a sobering, complex portrait of how participants in senior management roles at the DID endure institutionalised exclusion, abuse and burnout under the guise of leadership. While numeric gains suggest transformation, the deeper reality reflects an entrenched, gendered organisational culture that undermines substantive empowerment. Gender equity in this context remains largely symbolic, often achieved through the promotion of women into precarious roles without institutional support.

4.9.1. The glass ceiling, glass cliff and the politics of risk

At the heart of the DID organisational culture is the dual burden of the glass ceiling and the glass cliff. Women are blocked from promotion due to structural bias [Margaret's "structural ceiling"] while simultaneously appointed to high-risk, under-resourced portfolios designed to absorb institutional failure. Mapholba describes being handed work "beyond [her] capabilities" under threat of compulsion, while Mariah and Kia describe hostile environments where they must "do everything" despite lacking resources or support.

This reflects a pattern of instrumentalisation, where women are made hyper-visible in crises but remain invisible in reward structures. Nancy's observation that "they belittle you to remind you of your place" shows how exclusion is psychological as well as structural. These testimonies align with Acker's (1990) concept of gendered organisations, where formal roles conceal informal power structures shaped by masculinity.

4.9.2. Sexual harassment, intellectual erasure and exclusion as tools of discipline

Participants report experiences of sexual harassment, verbal abuse and intellectual theft not as anomalies but as mechanisms of social control. Kia was punished for rejecting sexual advances from a politician and an executive manager. Nancy notes that “sex for jobs is endemic,” where performance contracts and evaluations are used coercively.

Mariah’s account of verbal abuse and Nancy’s of idea theft, where women’s contributions are appropriated and credited to others - highlight the normalisation of gendered dispossession. These behaviours function as disciplinary tactics to silence, destabilise and delegitimise women in senior management. This validates Ahmed’s (2012) and Scully’s (2020) analyses of how institutional violence is routinised under bureaucratic rationality.

4.9.3. The missing ladder: developmental neglect and biased leadership assessment

Not a single participant in this study has been promoted internally, mentored, sponsored or trained by the DID. All were externally recruited. Mariah’s multiple unapproved training requests and Nancy’s experience of “no coaching, no mentorship, no promotion” exemplify how the DID masks its neglect with narratives of personal unpreparedness.

Despite 40% of SMS promotions going to women, these numeric indicators obscure developmental gatekeeping. Women are often evaluated based on interpersonal traits, not leadership potential (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001), while men receive clearer succession pathways. Mapholba highlights how “opportunities” are often disguised attempts to offload undesirable work.

The DID lacks bench strength. Women are present but unsupported. Their leadership remains conditional, not cultivated. This aligns with Lyness and Heilman’s (2006) argument that exclusion from leadership pipelines is a structural, not individual failure.

4.9.4. The emotional, physical and psychological cost of staying

Beneath the institutional barriers lies a deeper human toll. Leadership, in this context, is not a site of empowerment but one of chronic harm. Nancy, Mapholba, Margaret and Mariah speak candidly about the physical and emotional deterioration they’ve

experienced. Nancy required psychological intervention. Mapholba landed in emergency care due to stress. Margaret describes demoralisation and fear of reprisal. Mariah recounts missing her children's lives and feeling unable to realise her goals. These accounts reframe leadership as a site of harm not growth. The workplace becomes a source of moral injury, demanding performance under conditions that erode wellbeing and identity. Harassment doesn't end with the incident. It infiltrates mental and emotional life. Nancy describes how it was "just to unsettle, break." Mariah shares that ambulances have had to remove senior managers from work due to ill health and possibly stress. Mapholba recalls working late nights and weekends, losing all social connection. The cumulative emotional labour of navigating exclusion, hyper-visibility and hostility becomes a second shift, a form of invisible work necessary just to survive.

4.9.5 Burnout, caregiving and the double burden

Work-life integration is a myth for these women. Kia describes absorbing family responsibilities unacknowledged by her workplace. Nancy states plainly, "This job demands everything." Mariah has lost access to even basic forms of care, like exercise. Mapholba and her partner considered resignation due to her emotional and physical absence from home. This resonates with Correll et al.'s (2007) Motherhood Penalty, where caregiving is penalised rather than accommodated. The DID remains premised on masculine norms of constant availability, rendering women's dual roles incompatible with success.

4.9.6 Conditional spousal support

Support at home varies but often mirrors workplace dynamics. Kia and Nancy describe partners who withdraw support when traditional gender roles are challenged. Margaret experiences emotional abandonment, even during illness or study. Only Mapholba describes active support, though it still stops short of full caregiving parity. Women are left to carry leadership alone, unsupported at work and only partially supported at home. The burden of success is individualised, while the cost is collectively borne.

4.9.7 Emotional resilience and strategic silence

Faced with persistent marginalisation, participants adopt tactical silence. Margaret, Nancy, Mapholba, Kia and Mariah all describe withholding their voices in meetings.

Nancy reflects on her withdrawal as a protective choice. Margaret has lost her confidence entirely. “They’ve broken me down.” This aligns with research on emotional resilience as a form of subversive coping (Crenshaw, 1991; Scully, 2020). Participants are not passive. They are managing survival in hostile systems through withdrawal, recalibration and self-protection.

4.9.8 Strategic resistance and quiet rebellion

Despite the harm, participants also describe powerful acts of agency enacted as withdrawal from institutional expectations, a redefinition of success and investment in self-determined futures.

4.9.8.1 Conforming to survive

Nancy articulates how survival often demands behavioural conformity. “Women have had to adopt that culture.” Kia adds that women shift their persona depending on the room. Mapholba reflects on becoming “someone I wasn’t.” These experiences echo the concept of emotional dissonance, where the cost of fitting in is authenticity. Survival becomes adaptation not transformation.

4.9.8.2 Redefining success and reclaiming autonomy

Yet many are now reclaiming agency through quiet rebellion. Kia chooses self-preservation. Nancy and Mapholba have stopped attending after hour meetings, investing instead in wellness and healing. Mariah is contemplating a move to private consulting. Mapholba is focusing on religious education, parenting and social intelligence. Margaret is studying again, using academic inquiry as a lens for clarity and purpose.

These are not exits. They are strategic reorientations. Success is no longer defined by institutional validation but by peace, autonomy and presence. As Nancy puts it, “It was the best decision I could have made in my life.”

4.10 Conclusion

The DID offers formal inclusion but withholds substantive empowerment. It promotes women into fragile roles, disciplines resistance through psychological and institutional violence and fails to provide the infrastructure for sustainable leadership. What

emerges from these findings is a portrait of invisible labour, strategic resistance and reimagined success.

Transformation cannot rely on representational metrics or performance targets alone. It requires dismantling the structural logics of exclusion, violence and neglect, and investing instead in a leadership model rooted in care, support and justice.

Together, participant's stories paint a powerful picture of systemic challenges at the intersection of gender, work and family, underlining the urgent need for cultural, organisational, and social transformation to support women's wellbeing and career sustainability.

The final chapter concludes the research by examining the systemic barriers that impede the advancement of women senior managers within the DID. It explores organisational and personal factors shaping women's progression, highlights the intersecting experiences of ethnic minority women and analyses the key inhibitors to their advancement. Rejecting deficit-based explanations, the chapter demonstrates that stalled progression is rooted in institutional dysfunction rather than individual failings. It reflects on the research process as a feminist space that fostered healing, agency, and honest dialogue. The chapter offers key recommendations, including structural reform, intersectional policy frameworks, gender-responsive leadership development, and trauma-informed wellness support. Ultimately, it calls for a feminist transformation of the DID, redefining leadership through care, inclusion and justice, rather than compliance with a self-preserving and exclusionary system.

5. Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This research has investigated the factors influencing the progression of women senior managers into executive management at the DID, located in Gauteng's public infrastructure sector. The study has answered the question and sub-questions detailed below:

5.1.1 Organisational factors which influence women's progression into executive management

Women's progression into executive management is obstructed by organisational structures and cultures that embed mechanisms of exclusion and control. The glass ceiling and glass cliff illustrate how women are denied upward mobility and simultaneously placed in precarious, unsupported roles. Participants describe how their professional expertise is routinely undermined, ignored, or appropriated, leading to career stagnation and disillusionment. Structural ceilings prevent growth despite qualifications, while risky assignments without support expose women to heightened scrutiny and blame. Theories such as Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) highlight how leadership remains constructed around masculine norms, rendering women's competence suspect and their presence conditional.

Sexual harassment, verbal abuse and intellectual erasure are used as tools of organisational discipline, silencing women who resist or assert autonomy. These are not isolated incidents but systemic practices that reinforce gendered power hierarchies. Women are punished for refusing advances, excluded from teams and subjected to emotional and psychological harm. The use of precarious roles as organisational control further maintains male-dominated leadership.

The intersection of the glass ceiling (Kahn & Louw, 2011) and glass cliff (Loden, 1978) reveals a culture where women are simultaneously blocked from progressing and exposed to failure. Participants feel unsafe, overburdened and coerced into roles outside their scope. Despite initiatives to eliminate barriers, progress remains slow. This illustrates how institutional norms and embedded biases continue to shape women's experiences and hinder genuine transformation within executive

management. The DPSA's (2009) utopian vision, of a "barrier-free public service" is a dystopian reality according to participant narratives.

5.1.2 Personal factors which influence women's progression into executive management

Women's progression into executive management is shaped by personal factors rooted in the work-life-wife strife, which highlights the triple burden of professional work, domestic labour and spousal roles. Entrenched gender norms assign caregiving and household responsibilities primarily to women, which contributes to the perception that they are not ideal workers (April et al., 2007). This results in the motherhood penalty (Correll et al., 2007), where women are viewed as less competent and committed, leading to fewer leadership opportunities, reduced pay, and slower career progression.

Participants report high levels of burnout from juggling demanding leadership roles and unrelenting caregiving responsibilities, echoing Booysen's (2007) and Pile's (2004) findings on the emotional and physical toll of dual roles. The unequal and conditional partner support described by participants reflects April et al.'s (2007) observation that only some women have access to enabling home support systems.
Participants adopt coping mechanisms such as strategic silence and conformity, behaviours linked to role incongruity theory (Torres et al., 2024), which highlights the conflict between feminine caregiving expectations and masculine leadership ideals. In response, participants engage in quiet rebellion, redefining success through wellness and personal development, thereby resisting institutional norms and asserting agency (Sen, 2017) within restrictive systems. Sowa (2015); Davies (1991); Crainer (2003) and Kellan (2008) advocate for counter narratives which tell the stories of women without masculine bias demonstrating the agency of women, this research actively demonstrates this transformational lens.

5.1.3 Experiences of ethnic minority women

The experiences of minority women in senior management are shaped by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), where overlapping identities such as race, ethnicity, gender and political alignment compound discrimination. Participants' narratives reveal how structural barriers and organisational cultures marginalise

minority women, even within gender inclusion efforts. The Gender and Social Norms Index (UNDP, 2023) confirms persistent bias in public administration, where women's leadership is often symbolic or performative, this research confirms the bias persists. The construction Boys' Club (Aydın & Erbil, 2022); culture, evident in DID, reflects role incongruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), as leadership remains coded as masculine. Even with female executives, patriarchal norms persist, aligning with the Queen Bee Syndrome (Staines et al., 1973), where some women in power uphold the same exclusionary structures. Minority women report exclusion from informal networks, biased feedback and disproportionate workloads. These dynamics echo the glass ceiling (Loden, 1978) and performance bias (McKinsey, 2023).

Participants' testimonies demonstrate intersectional invisibility (Greenaway & Eibach, 2008), where their contributions are undervalued and advancement depends more on political patronage than merit. Cultural misalignment further marginalises those who do not conform to dominant norms (Mathur-Helm, 2005). These realities reflect a lack of inclusive bench strength (Lyness & Heilman, 2006), limiting ethnic minority women's access to executive pipelines. Systemic reform must therefore prioritise intersectional feminist frameworks to dismantle these enduring barriers.

5.1.4 Women as inhibitors of their own advancement

Framing women as inhibitors of their own advancement misrepresents the broader institutional and political architecture that limits their agency. Agency, defined by Sen (1999) as the freedom to pursue goals one values, is systematically undermined by organisational cultures that deny women autonomy, support, and recognition. Within masculinised leadership models (Eagly & Karau, 2002), women's assertiveness is penalised through likeability bias (Heilman, 2001), forcing them to suppress authentic leadership styles in order to survive. This emotional calibration is not self-sabotage but rather adaptive agency under constraint.

The Queen Bee Syndrome (Staines et al., 1973) is frequently misread as betrayal. In reality, it reflects strategic positioning by women in systems that reward conformity to patriarchal norms. Similarly, fractured sisterhood often results from scarcity created by political gatekeeping, patronage, and stalled progression—not a lack of solidarity. As intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) shows, women must navigate overlapping

forms of exclusion based on race, gender and perceived loyalty. These factors limit not only opportunity but also psychological safety. Participants demonstrate agency not in control over advancement but in resisting burnout, setting boundaries and continuing in the face of systemic sabotage. What is often labelled as personal failure is, in fact, institutional failure to enable meaningful, empowered leadership for women.

Ultimately, this research illuminates the complex, often hostile terrain that participants navigate in their progression into executive management at the DID. Organisational factors such as patronage, political gatekeeping and cultures of surveillance actively inhibit women's advancement, as participants describe being overlooked, undermined and excluded despite competence. The emotional toll is severe, with several participants reporting burnout, anxiety and health issues directly linked to institutional dysfunction.

Personal factors, including caregiving responsibilities, lack of mentorship and internalised survival strategies, also shape participant's trajectories. Many participants struggle to balance multiple roles without adequate organisational support and some begin to question whether enduring in such spaces is worth the cost. For minority women, the barriers are compounded by race, ethnicity and political non-alignment, revealing intersectional exclusions that demand specific attention.

5.2 Reflections and limitations on the research process

Crucially, the research challenges the assumption that women are inhibitors of their own advancement. While some reflect on internalised limitations, the broader findings expose institutional failures rather than individual deficits. The interviews became spaces of resistance where participants reflected, reclaimed voice and redefined leadership on their own terms. Ultimately, the study shows that without structural reform, resilience becomes a burden and leadership remains symbolic rather than transformative for women senior managers at the DID.

This research is grounded in a African Feminist ethos that values emotional safety, lived experience and relational trust as central to knowledge production. Through carefully facilitated interviews, women participants in senior management at the DID were given space to speak freely, reflect deeply and challenge systems that often silence or diminish them.

A core aim was the creation of a sense of psychological safety and emotional liberation. Participants described the interviews as a rare opportunity for honest, reflective dialogue. Nancy shared, “If you had not mentioned that my name would not be published, I would have approached it differently. But because you did, I felt liberated to share my experiences.” Mariah expressed, “Some of the questions you’re asking me gave me a reflective moment. I can’t remember when last, I’ve actually used time to reflect on my life.” For many, the interview space was not just data collection but a site of emotional release and clarity.

This research engages with the complexities of oral narration, recognising that memory, voice and the relationship between interviewer and participant all shape the narrative. The interviewer is not neutral but becomes part of the story. Throughout this process, participants were not only sharing their experiences but were also observing and interpreting the interviewer (Portelli, 2009*)*. The researcher mindfully asked participants about their perceptions of the researcher, acknowledging that this dynamic influences the data. These insights revealed personal reasons behind their participation, offering a richer more layered understanding.

Relational intelligence and trust were also repeatedly acknowledged. Participants attributed their openness to the researcher’s empathy and presence rather than shared identity. Nancy noted, “Had you not been mature enough to deal with the emotions of this discussion, the outcome would have been different.”

While shared womanhood sometimes offered a sense of ease, participants often emphasised that connection came more from the researcher’s approach than their demographic identity. Mapholba said, “You could have been a man, and if you approached it in the same way, the result would have been the same.”

The interviews also facilitated critical reflection as a feminist act. Margaret acknowledged, “By simply talking and reflecting on the questions, I realise I need to be more assertive.” Nancy added, “Speaking truth to power is a very career-limiting trait to have.” For many, this space allowed them to confront internalised limitations and reconsider their roles within an unjust system.

In effect, this research became more than a data-gathering exercise. It was a feminist space for connection, healing and reclaiming voice. A safe space where trust and reflection offered participants a sense of agency and affirmation within an oppressive professional environment.

This research exposes the profound dissonance between the rhetoric of gender equality and the lived realities of women participants in senior management at the DID. The participants' narratives are marked by emotional fatigue, stalled progression and deep structural injustice. According to participants, the DID remains hostile to women's full participation, not only through exclusionary practices but through the active weaponisation of abuse, politics and surveillance.

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrate remarkable emotional resilience, constructing new meanings of leadership grounded in self-care, spirituality and alternative definitions of success. These acts of agency manifest as quiet rebellion and subversion reflecting an urgent need to reimagine leadership as relational, humane and inclusive, rather than transactional, aggressive and masculinised.

However, resilience should not be romanticised. The burden of adaptation lies overwhelmingly on women, while the DID evades responsibility for reform. Without structural change, resilience becomes another word for tolerated suffering.

5.3 Limitations

Building trust during the interview took time and both active and close listening. There was an ebb and flow to the interview cycle (Makana, 2018). The ebb was in the early stage of the interview cycle when participants were evaluating the researcher and apportioning their level of trust and confidence in the researcher. The researcher is an African feminist with a background in social science and mindfully included a set of questions at the final stage of the interview to solicit the interview experiences of participants.

When reflecting on the interview process all participants' said that they were surprised at their level of openness and unfiltered responses. Kia confided deeply personal experiences, saying, "The level of comfort you've [researcher] created has made it easy to have this conversation."

Margaret voiced initial scepticism about the researcher's intent, revealing a broader institutional distrust. Margaret highlighted the isolation created by fragmented organisational structures. She was sceptical about the researchers trustworthiness and was expecting to be interrogated on her work performance despite receiving a full brief on the scope of the interview:

> To be honest, before coming here, I thought I should make sure not to discuss any private matters. I was cautious about that. If someone were to find out about me - I'd be careful. I also thought that you might not be interested in my story. I even went through my policy documents because I thought you were checking my work knowledge but this [interview] was only about my personal experiences.

Nancy reflected that she thought that the researcher would be biased:

> At first, I thought this interview was going to be very personal; like it would come from a place of hurt, especially considering what we all go through at the DID. I say this because I've been through the same pain. So, I expected the questions to come from a space of bias or let me just say, from a space of not being fully healed. But it didn't come across that way at all. I have to give you [researcher] credit for that because I really thought your questions would be biased.

The extended duration of the interviews and the emotional responses the questions evoked for participants, meant that the researcher had to proceed cautiously, pausing when necessary and proceeding with care and at a pace suitably tailored to each participant. This meant that the fieldwork was lengthy and intensive.

The sensitive nature of this research, placed the mantle of ethical care on the researcher to not cause harm to participants'. Extensive de-identification and the use of participant selected pseudonyms, was key to protecting participants' privacy and ensuring their confidentiality throughout the study. By removing or altering any identifying information, the process helped prevent potential harm or exposure. This approach was grounded in a deep sense of care and responsibility, placing the wellbeing of participants at the centre of the research. It aimed to create a safe space

for honest sharing, especially for those who have experienced marginalisation. De-identification also helped balance the power between researcher and participants', ensuring that voices were heard without risk. It reflects a strong commitment to ethical and respectful research reflective of the researcher's African feminist positionality.

Building trust took time, as some participants initially questioned the researcher's intent. Interviews were emotionally intense, lengthy and required ethical sensitivity, tailored pacing, and strong confidentiality to ensure safety, openness and respectful engagement throughout. Given the length of the interviews, transcription and data disaggregation was intensive and time consuming.

5.4 Practical Recommendations

To address the deeply entrenched gendered and intersectional inequities identified in this study, a multi-pronged strategy is required that confronts structural dysfunction while centring care, inclusion and accountability.

First, the imperative for structural accountability and cultural reform demands the establishment of independent, impartial mechanisms to investigate and sanction instances of verbal and sexual abuse. This must be coupled with rigorous audits of decision-making processes to promote transparency in recruitment, promotions and project allocation. Such efforts should be underpinned by the dismantling of informal patronage networks that shield misconduct and undermine organisational integrity, particularly at senior leadership levels.

Second, fostering gender-responsive leadership development is essential. This entails the creation of mentorship, coaching and advancement pathways explicitly targeted at women, especially those from politically and ethnically marginalised groups. Development programmes must be undergirded by feminist leadership principles that centre relationality, care and collective responsibility rather than competition and individualism.

Third, ensuring psychological safety and wellness support necessitates the implementation of confidential, trusted, trauma-informed wellness initiatives that are responsive to the specific pressures faced by women in senior roles. The DID has an externally administered employee assistance service, however none of the participants feel safe utilising this fearing their confidential information will be

weaponised against them by the department. Holistic wellness support must include recognition of caregiving and emotional labour as legitimate dimensions of professional life, with tangible implications for workload, performance expectations, and support structures.

Fourth, the integration of work-life balance and flexible arrangements is critical. The DID's organisational policies should institutionalise flexible work options, including remote work, without stigma or punitive consequence. Such measures must be framed not as special accommodations but as standard practices aligned with contemporary understandings of productive, inclusive work environments.

Fifth, the DID should adopt intersectional policy frameworks across all HR, wellness and leadership development efforts. This requires continuous monitoring of equity outcomes across multiple identity axes, including gender, race, ethnicity, age, life stage, differing ability status, caregiving status and political affiliation, to ensure that inclusion efforts are substantive and multidimensional.

Finally, achieving sustainable change will require a commitment to feminist organisational transformation. This involves moving away from punitive, individualised performance regimes and towards collective, values-driven cultures that prioritise wellbeing and justice. Central to this process is the empowerment of women-led forums inclusive of all SMS regardless of gender to co-create and drive structural reform from within, ensuring that transformation is both participatory and grounded in lived experience.

Together, these recommendations constitute a blueprint for a more inclusive, equitable and humane organisational culture at the DID. This culture affirms women's leadership not as an exception or symbolic gesture but as integral to institutional legitimacy and effectiveness.

5.5 Future Studies

This section outlines key recommendations for future research aimed at deepening the understanding of gendered barriers to executive advancement in the public sector. Three recommendations are set forth below.

Analyse the impact of political versus administrative appointment powers: Given that political heads [Premiers or MECs] appoint executive level managers, while administrative heads [HoDs or delegates] appoint senior managers, future research should examine how these governance arrangements affect gender equity in leadership appointments. Special attention should be given to the extent to which political discretion and administrative decision-making support or hinder the 50% gender parity goal in executive management.

Explore the effects of delegated authority on gender outcomes: A comparative study across provinces or departments could illuminate how variations in delegated authority [e.g., from Premiers to MECs] influence the gender composition of executive appointments. Understanding these power dynamics may uncover structural or political bottlenecks that obstruct the promotion of women into executive leadership roles.

Evaluate promotion pathways and career trajectories by gender: Future research should trace the career paths of male and female senior managers to assess how organisational structures and decision-making practices differentially impact their trajectories. This includes analysing gender bench strength, time to promotion, frequency of acting roles and access to developmental opportunities.

These recommendations can guide future research toward a more nuanced and systemic understanding of the barriers to gender parity in public sector leadership and help identify targeted interventions for sustainable transformation.

5.6 Conclusion

This research investigates the factors influencing the advancement of women into executive management within Gauteng's DID, a male-dominated space despite South Africa's progressive gender equity policies. Framed through an African feminist epistemology and conducted using narrative inquiry, the study centres the lived experiences of five women senior managers. It explores organisational dynamics, personal challenges, the experiences of ethnic minority women and the ways in which internalised or strategic behaviours may influence women's advancement. The aim is not only to identify structural and cultural inhibitors but also to contribute toward

gender-inclusive, transformative leadership models within the public infrastructure sector.

Chapter One introduces the research problem, providing context, rationale and key research questions. It identifies the ongoing gender gap at executive levels in the DID and outlines how African feminist perspectives provide a culturally and politically relevant lens to explore these issues. The chapter positions the research as an urgent and necessary intervention into a space where the limited promotion of women senior managers into executive management chronically persists.

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive review of the literature and articulates the African feminist theoretical framework underpinning the study. It critically engages with global and local scholarship on women's advancement into executive management, focusing on barriers such as the glass ceiling, tokenism, racial exclusion and societal expectations around caregiving. The chapter emphasises the relevance of intersectionality, particularly in the South African context and challenges dominant Western feminist paradigms by rooting the analysis in African feminist thought. It makes clear that while legislation exists to promote gender equity, structural and cultural practices often undermine its intent, leading to persistent underrepresentation of women in executive roles. The literature also affirms the need for leadership models rooted in care and contextual awareness.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, grounded in qualitative narrative inquiry and African feminist principles. It details the selection of five purposively sampled participants and discusses the ethical, reflexive and analytical approaches used. Emphasising the importance of trust, participant agency and emotional safety, the chapter shows how the research process became a space for healing and critical reflection. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the study generated rich, context-sensitive data that reveal the nuanced and often painful realities of women navigating leadership in a hostile organisational culture.

Chapter Four introduces the participants and presents the key findings, contextualising their personal and professional backgrounds. It offers a detailed account of the organisational and personal factors influencing their progression, highlighting issues such as the lack of mentorship, institutional surveillance, ethnic exclusion and the

disproportionate burden of caregiving. The findings expose how the DID creates an illusion of inclusion while failing to provide the necessary support for sustainable leadership. Participants' are often placed in precarious or high-risk roles with little support, and their resistance to institutional harm is frequently pathologised. Despite these challenges, participants display strategic resilience, reimagining success outside traditional models. The chapter argues that transformation cannot rely solely on numeric targets but must dismantle embedded logics of exclusion and create systems grounded in care and justice.

Chapter Five synthesises the findings and reflects on the broader implications. It examines how structural sexism, political patronage and institutional neglect inhibit women's progression and wellbeing. The chapter firmly rejects deficit narratives that blame women for their lack of advancement, instead showing how their withdrawal or resistance often represents rational responses to systemic harm. The research process itself becomes a feminist act; providing space for reflection, agency and healing. It concludes with practical recommendations, including structural reform, trauma-informed wellness support, intersectional policy frameworks and the institutionalisation of feminist leadership development. Ultimately, the chapter calls for a fundamental transformation of the DID, where leadership is redefined through inclusivity, relationality and collective accountability - offering a powerful vision for change in the public sector.

In the final analysis, the DID is not a broken system. It is a predatory one, designed around exploitation. The metaphors participants use say it all:an

- In Animal Planet, women are prey, constantly surveilled and hunted.
- In Survivor, every move is political, every word a risk.
- As tools in a toolbox, women are not valued, just used and discarded.

And yet, participants endure. They operate in a constrained barrier riddled system, a far cry from the DPSA's (2009) "barrier-free public service". They resist with silence, with strategy, with ethics and with running shoes, books, boundaries, spirituality and meditation. They refuse to disappear. Kia's final reflection leaves us not in despair but in defiant clarity: "It was a dark space… until I stepped outside and realised the sun is out… Life is not determined by these people."

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7. Annexure 1: Gender Representation of SMS

Comparative Table of Gender Representation in Executive Management, levels 15 and 16 [1]and Senior Management, levels 13 & 14 as at the 2023-2024 financial year by Department (With disaggregated % for Women across both levels then processed to provide a total percentage for the department):

Department	Executive Management Total	Men in Exe Management	Women in Exe Management	% Women in Executive Management	Levels 13 & 14 Total	Men in Levels 13 & 14	Women in Levels 13 & 14	% Women in Levels 13 & 14
DARDE	9	4	5	**55.56%**	23	10	13	**56.52%**
OoP	4	1	3	**75.00%**	43	15	28	**65.12%**
GDSD	4	1	3	**75.00%**	30	12	18	**60.00%**
GDE	4	2	2	**50.00%**	22	12	10	**45.45%**
SACR	2	1	1	**50.00%**	22	10	12	**54.55%**
GDCS	1	0	1	**100.00%**	24	12	12	**50.00%**
DID	5	2	3	**60.00%**	60	38	22	**36.67%**
e-Gov	1	0	1	**100.00%**	22	14	8	**36.36%**
CoGTA	5	3	2	**40.00%**	28	14	14	**50.00%**
GPT	1	1	0	**0.00%**	71	34	29	**40.85%**
DED	13	10	3	**23.08%**	35	16	19	**54.29%**
GDoH	6	2	4	**66.67%**	93	56	37	**39.78%**
DHS	7	2	5	**71.43%**	39	18	21	**53.85%**
GDRT	6	5	1	**16.67%**	30	18	12	**40.00%**

[1] The GPG defines Top Management as levels 15 and 16. This study uses the term executive management to indicate levels 15 and 16. The term senior manager indicates levels 13 and 14.

Annexure 2: Breakdown of GPG Departments

Breakdown of GPG departments as at 2023-2024 financial year which have achieved the 50% representation of women across all levels of SMS and the departments which have not attained the target:

Category	Department	Percentage of Women across all levels of SMS
Exceeded Goal (50%)	OoP	65.96%
Exceeded Goal (50%)	GDSD	61.76%
Exceeded Goal (50%)	GDHS	56.52%
Exceeded Goal (50%)	DARDE	56.25%
Exceeded Goal (50%)	GDSD	52.00%
Exceeded Goal (50%)	SACR	54.17%
Under Goal (50%)	GDE	46.15%
Under Goal (50%)	GDoH	41.41%
Under Goal (50%)	DID	38.46%
Under Goal (50%)	e-Gov	39.13%
Under Goal (50%)	GPT	40.28%
Under Goal (50%)	GDED	45.83%
Under Goal (50%)	CoGRA	48.48%
Under Goal (50%)	GDRT	36.11%

Annexure 3: Ranking of GPG Departments

Ranking of the 14 GPG departments as at 2023-2024 financial year from highest to lowest based on the percentage of women representation across all levels of Senior Management (Top Management and Levels 13 and 14), with each department assigned a rank from 1 to 15 (1 being the highest and 15 being the lowest):

Rank	Department	% Women in All SMS Levels
1	OoP	**65.96%**
2	GDSD	**61.76%**
3	GDHS	**56.52%**
4	DARDE	**56.25%**
5	SACR	**54.17%**
6	GDCS	**52.00%**
7	CoGTA	**48.48%**
8	GDE	**46.15%**
9	DED	**45.83%**
10	GDoH	**41.41%**
11	GPT	**40.28%**
12	e-Gov	**39.13%**
13	DID	**38.46%**
14	GDRT	**36.11%**

Annexure 4: DID Disaggregation of Population

The DID disaggregation of the Metapopulation and Population as of May 2025:

LEVEL	NUMBER	GENDER	
13	38	24 Males	15 Females
14	11	6 Males	5 Females
15	4	1 Males	3 Females
16	1	0 Males	1 Females
[2]Gender as % across all levels of the SMS		**56%**	**44%**

[2] Note the change in the number in total number of SMS from 65 in Annexure 1 as at March 2024 and the most recent total as 54 as at May 2025. This delta of 11 includes an update of the resignations and terminations between the two-time deltas.

Annexure 5: Information Sheet

Dear Madam

My name is Ramona Baijnath, I am a Masters student in Business Administration at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr. Jenika Gobind. I am conducting a research study about the career progression of women senior managers into executive management at the Department of Infrastructure Development. The study title is Factors influencing the advancement of women into executive management in Gauteng's infrastructure sector.

I am inviting you to take part in an interview. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about 180 minutes. The interview will take place at a location convenient to you at a time suitable for you.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. This data will be stored in an encrypted storage device for 2 years and will be deleted after this period. Only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the data.

During the research activity, I will need to ask for some personal information about you, including your biographical data and your personal experiences.

The interview will be confidential. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you.

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. 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 / some of the questions asked may make you feel sad or upset. If this happens, I will stop the interview and continue another time pending your permission.

This research study will be written as a research report and publications. 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 or my supervisor 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,



Researcher:
Ramona Baijnath, Wits email: 2824663@students.wits.ac.za Mobile: 076 942 3419

Supervisor:
Dr Jenika Gobind, email: jenika.gobind@wits.ac.za Phone number: 011 717 3761

Annexure 6: Research Instrument

Interview Guide:
Verbal Recorded Interview
Research Instrument: Researcher Administrated in-depth semi-structured interview

Date: Time: Location:

Pseudonym:

Biographical Data

Name:

Surname:

Position:

Number of years in position:

Race:

Ethnicity:

Age:

Highest Level of Education:

Partnership Status:

Children:

Context, Employment History and Aspirations

1. Who is Participant 1 and how do you describe yourself?
2. Describe the many roles you play outside of work.
3. Tell me about your employment history in the public service.
4. Why do you think you have not been unsuccessful or successful?
5. What does it take to be a woman SMS?
6. Describe what position you envision to occupy in the SMS.
7. What are you doing to attain this career goal?
8. How old were you when you first joined the SMS?
9. Describe your appointment process?
10. How long were you applying to join the SMS?
11. What has been the highlight of your SMS career thus far?
12. What has been the most challenging aspect of your SMS career thus far?
13. Do you enjoy being part of SMS? If so why, if not why?
14. Describe your leadership style
15. Are you valued by your subordinates?
16. Are you valued by your manager?
17. How long did it take you to progress to the next level of SMS?

Enablers and Barriers to SMS Entry

1. Do you believe you are taken credibly in the DID?
2. Is your opinion valued? If so why, if not why?
3. Do you often speak in management meetings? If so why, if not why?
4. Do you get credit for the work you do? If so why, if not why?
5. Do you think there are barriers to progression for women in SMS?
6. Is the SMS a boy's club?
7. Why do you think there are not more women senior managers at the DID?
8. Do you think that the policies and legislation in place support the 50% representation of women across ALL levels of SMS? If so why, if not why?
9. Do you think that the DID has inclusive racial diversity?
10. Have you upgraded your academic qualifications since joining the SMS? Explain why?
11. Is there anything that makes you uncomfortable at work?
12. Has anyone threatened you at work verbally, physically or sexually? Explain.
13. Do you feel safe in your position and workplace?
14. Is the culture at all departments the same or is the DID unique?
15. Do have the agency at work to perform your responsibilities or are you given instructions? Explain.
16. Do you experience workplace hostility with SMS? If so, how do you deal with this?
17. Do you have the latitude to refuse to perform certain work or must you obey every instruction? Explain why.
18. Do you think your performance management evaluation is fair? Explain.
19. Have you had any performance management evaluation disputes? Explain.
20. Do you often perform work outside of your job description. Explain why.
21. Do you think that you are able to progress within the SMS? Explain why.
22. Do you think there is a glass ceiling for women in SMS at the DID?

Leadership Style, Bias and Opportunities

1. Describe your leadership style.
2. Would you describe it as more feminine or masculine? Why did you choose this style?
3. Do you think the Public Service recruits the right people for the right job? Explain why?
4. Would you describe yourself as passive or aggressive? Explain why?
5. What is the biggest benefit of being a senior manager?
6. What is the biggest downfall of being a senior manager?
7. Describe your workplace culture in relation to the SMS.
8. Do you have access to SMS training opportunities, bursaries, networks, personal development?
9. Are you satisfied that these offering empower you as a woman in SMS?
10. Have you been asked to act in a higher SMS position? Explain why.
11. Why do you think women are slower to progress to the higher rungs of SMS?
12. Do you think you have benefited from employment equity? Explain why.
13. Is there anything you had to sacrifice to do your job as a member of the SMS?

14. Do you think the infrastructure sector has transformed and is more accessible to women? Explain why.
15. Is the DID transformed and inclusive or does the patriarchy and Boys Club exist?
16. Do you think that women managers are aggressive?
17. Do you think that women managers are likeable?
18. Have you ever been on maternity leave as a SMS, was this accommodated well by your manager?

Support and Networks

1. Do you support women SMS?
2. Are you supported by women SMS? Explain.
3. Would you prefer to be managed by a man or women or are you indifferent? Explain why?
4. What role do you think women in executive management should play in the development of women in the lower rungs of SMS?
5. Does this happen in the DID?
6. Do you have a positive network within the DID where you can go for advice and support?
7. Are you treated with compassion and care by your manager? Explain.
8. Do you think male SMS and women SMS receive the same feedback and criticism? Explain.
9. Describe a moment when your manager was not satisfied with your performance. Did you think they handled it well? How did you feel? What could have gone better?
10. Do you think your performance is judged on the same merits as your male colleagues? Explain why.
11. Do you network at work events? Explain why.

Career Progression

1. Are you actively looking for a promotion /new job?
2. How many applications do you make annually?
3. Have you gone to any interviews and competency tests?
4. Why do you think you have not been unsuccessful or successful?
5. Do you think that the public service has a fair recruitment process which priorities designated groups? Explain why?
6. What avenues do you pursue if you are not successful to give you satisfaction?
7. Do you feel like your career is progressing well or is it stagnant? Explain why.
8. If you have not been looking for a promotion /new job, why do you not choose to?
9. How do you grow and enrich your life?
10. Why do you choose to remain at the DID?
11. Do you think there are public service opportunities available for your career progression? Explain why.

Support Systems and Responsibilities

1. Do you have a helper or support system at home? How does this assist you?
2. What unpaid work do you do in your private time?
3. Are you supported by your partner?
4. Describe your household responsibilities?
5. Do you have any social or cultural responsibilities?
6. Describe your responsibilities as a mother or caregiver.
7. Describe your responsibilities as a partner.
8. Do you have a role in supporting your partners career? Elaborate.
9. Does your partner have a role in supporting your career? Elaborate.
10. Are there any cultural or social expectations you must deliver on?
11. When your child is sick who takes time off to care for the child?
12. Who takes care of you when you are unwell?
13. Would you say you have a good work life balance?
14. Do you have hobbies and passions outside of work?
15. Do you have access to workplace wellness programmes? Have you accessed them? Explain why.
16. Have you ever been asked if you plan to have children by a manager or recruiter?
17. Why do you think there are few women youth in the SMS?
18. Do you work afterhours or on weekends? How does this merge with your social life?
19. Have you ever been asked to cancel your leave. Explain why.
20. Do you have flexible working hours? If yes, how does this assist you? If no, how does this burden you?
21. Would you like flexible working hours and remote work opportunities?

Interview Experience and Observations

1. How did this interview process make you feel?
2. Is there anything about me or my approach that has made you feel uncomfortable
3. Do you think my race, age, position or gender has had an impact on this interview process?
4. What did you observe about me during this interview process?
5. What do you find that is similar between us and what are our differences?
6. Would you be more comfortable undertaking this process with a person of a different gender or race?
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Annexure 7: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Title of project: Factors influencing the advancement of women into executive management in Gauteng's infrastructure sector

Name of researcher: Ramona Baijnath

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 and book chapter	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 and book chapter)	YES	NO

…… (signature)
…… (name of participant)
…… (date)

…… (signature)

…… (name of researcher/person seeking consent)
…… (date)

Annexure 8: Permission to Conduct Research

GAUTENG PROVINCE
INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Dr Ramona Baijnath
Wits Business School
Student # 2824663

Dear Dr Baijnath

RE: Permission to conduct research at the Gauteng Department of Infrastructure Development [DID] towards the research component of a Master's Degree in Business Administration [MBA] at the Wits Business School [WBS]

Your correspondence dated 11 September 2024 refers.

I am pleased to inform you that the Head of Department [HoD] at the Gauteng Department of Infrastructure Development [DID], Ms. Masabata Mutlaneng has approved your request to conduct research on the factors influencing the advancement of women senior managers into executive management at the DID.

Dr Baijnath is granted permission to:

V. Permission to conduct the study focused on factors influencing the advancement of women senior managers into executive management at the DID.
VI. Permission to access the DID offices and engage with the study participants, Directorate(s) responsible and relevant staff.
VII. Permission to access information and data relevant to the study.
VIII. Permission to store and dispose of data relevant to the study in accordance with WBS protocols.

Dr Baijnath undertakes to observe the following ethical considerations:

V. To interview participants/ informants only upon the receipt of written informed consent.
VI. To conduct interviews with research participants at agreed upon times to minimise disruptions.
VII. To store data and dispose thereof in accordance with WBS rules.
VIII. Share the final research paper with the Department.

Kindly address all enquiries on this matter to the Director Research, Ms. Emmah Mkhatshwa via email: emmah.mkhatshwa@gauteng.gov.za or mobile: 076 480 3759.

I wish you a successful research journey.

Ms. Masabata Mutlaneng
Head of Department
Department of Infrastructure Development
Date:

Annexure 9: Ethical Clearance

Graduate School of Business Administration
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Wits Business School Ethics Committee
Constituted under the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical)

Ethics Clearance Certificate

Ethics protocol number: WBS/BA2824663/642
This certificate is only valid with a legitimate ethics protocol number and signed by the Researcher (below).

This certificate is only valid if accompanied by formal permission from the relevant stakeholder(s).

Project title	Factors influencing the advancement of women into executive management in Gauteng's infrastructure sector
Investigator / Researcher	Dr Ramona Baijnath
Nature of Project	MBA (Research Article)
Decision of the Committee	Approved, provided stakeholders and participants are guaranteed confidentialty.
Issue Date of Certificate	24/10/2024
Expiry date	Date of submission of the project / research report
Chairperson	Dr Ayanda Magida ☎ +27 11 717 3953 ✉ ayanda.magida@wits.ac.za

Declaration by Researcher

One copy must be signed by the Researcher and returned to the Chairperson of the Wits Business School Ethics Committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature

Date:

Annexure 10: List of Participants

The following is a list of participants, presented in the order in which they volunteered to participate:

Order of Volunteering	Participant Name
1	Mariah
2	Margaret
3	Mapholba
4	Kia
5	Nancy