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# Enablers of advancement of women to top management positions in South Africa

**Sehloho, Emily**

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# Enablers of advancement of women to top management positions in South Africa

**BY**

**Name: Emily Sehloho**

**Student number: 2515407**

This research report is submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree Master of Business Administration (MBA)

Research supervisor: Dr Jenika Gobind

Declaration

I, Emily M. Sehloho, hereby declare that the work presented herein is my own work. any work that is not mine has been acknowledged and referenced properly. This is in partial fulfilment of the degree Masters in Business Administration. This work has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any university.

Signed: Date: 29 February 2024



Emily Sehloho

Supervisor: Date: 29 February 2024

Dr Jenika Gobind

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I would like to thank my family for supporting me through this journey and for being my cheerleaders. This would not have been possible without you by my side.

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## Abstract

The glass ceiling continues to be a phenomenon that exists in the workplace where women find themselves able to move from junior roles to middle management roles but somehow find it hard to move into the upper echelons of management. There is sufficient research on the barriers that prevent women from moving into senior or top management but there is little research on how these barriers can be overcome. The purpose of this paper is to find out from women who managed to go beyond the glass ceiling, how that was possible and what organisations can do to enable women in top management positions.

A qualitative study was undertaken by way of semi-structured interviews. A total of 11 participants were interviewed consisting of 3 men and 8 women. A theoretical framework from the literature review was used to compare the data collected from the interviews.

Based on the findings, both men and women indicated that the organisation must be intentional about enabling women to reach top management positions. Coaching and mentoring were identified by the women as the most effective contributing factor to enabling women to reach top management positions. One of the challenges that was identified by a few respondents included the impostor syndrome which left the women feeling inadequate for these roles.

All participants agreed that sometimes there is a bias from men towards women which stems from a historical, patriarchal society and the respondents agreed that top managers and human resource managers have a role to play to change this landscape. There were other interventions that were identified to assist enabling women such as leadership programs, but these were deemed not to be as effective especially when these programs are not designed for women specifically.

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# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Introduction

There is an increase of women in the workplace since the early 1900s and yet women continue to be marginalized. Women are paid lower than their male counterpart and even though they are given opportunities to grow to higher positions there are still fewer women in top management in different sectors and different countries. Qadir (2019) referred to a United Nations report that revealed that half of the population consists of women and more than 40% are in the labor force but they only receive 10 percent of the world's income.

Statistics South Africa shows that women represent 51.1% of the population and yet they are still the minority in top managerial positions (Statistics South Africa, 2021). During the apartheid period black African women were paid less than their counterparts and even given less pension funds. Women in South Africa have been marginalised along the gender lines and Black African women were further marginalised based on their race and they have felt the brunt of this unfairness (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021).

The South African government implemented the Employment equity Act of 1998 and the women empowerment and gender equality bill to promote fair selection of women and opportunities for them to be considered for top management roles but there is still a significant gap between men and women that are in top management (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021).

As of 2020, only 10% of women occupied positions as Directors in companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. This is despite the efforts by women to improve their education and upgrade their skills (Khwela et al., 2020).

Research shows that there are barriers to women's advancement and as a result it is believed that there is an invisible but real glass ceiling that exists (Opatha, 2020). The phenomenon of a glass ceiling is an old concept that was coined in the 1970's which explained the hidden barriers that hampered the advancement of women's careers and continued to evolve in the years to specifically include advancement to top level management (Machibaya & Ndamba, 2023).

Other researchers have identified the barriers that inhibit the growth of women such as gender stereotypes, discrimination, and organizational culture among others (Jauhar & Lau, 2018).

Based on literature, there is clearly a gap in what organizations can do to overcome or remove those boundaries. The purpose of the study is to find out from the women in South Africa that have overcome these barriers, what they did to overcome the barriers, what skills and attributes they needed to be successful and what other women can do to retract this glass ceiling. The research will also find out from men in top management what they believe can be done to advance women to top management positions.

This will be done by interviewing women and men who are in top management positions in South Africa in the corporate sector with the aim to understand their perspective of what they perceive are the reasons why most women are not advancing in their careers to top management. Top management, for the purpose of this study, will include those in senior and executive roles who are responsible for the organization's long-term success and whose job includes setting long-term goals and defining strategies to achieve them (Toit, 2021). This will include Human Resource Managers as well.

The results from the interviews will give an overview of what policies, if any, need to be put in place and how human resource practitioners with the support of senior management can change the workplace landscape to be more accommodating for women and allow them the same opportunities as the men.

### 1.2 Background to the study

In the past few years there has been an increased number of females in the workplace, and in most countries, women make up more than 50% of the population in the world (Qadir, 2019). This is a continuing trend in the world and with civilization, and changes in norms and cultures, women are no longer only expected to be at home raising their family and relying on the husband to provide for them. As a result, more women than in the past are acquiring further education and making themselves available for employment in the workplaces (Qadir, 2019).

Research shows that there seems to be a trend where women can climb up the corporate ladder to middle management but somehow there seems to be a barrier that prevents most from

moving beyond that to top management (Moraes et al., 2022). The number of women in the upper echelons of management continue to be lower than their male counterparts despite the women's efforts to improve their education (Khwela et al., 2020).

There is still a perception for men to think that women should still be working at home and taking care of the family and that the roles in the organization are better suited for men. They also perceive women to be inferior performers (Hagevall, 2021).

Research shows that organisations with women representation in top management have better financial performance, better policies that promote better work and family balance, and participative decision making, among other things (Nair, 2023).

The purpose of this research is to identify how women can overcome these barriers that exist and what organisations can do to remove these obstacles in South Africa.

### 1.3 Research problem

Multiple studies have proven that there are existing barriers to women's advancements in the workplace despite the number of women in the workplace having increased. Some of the barriers are visible and known while some are suggested to be invisible but real such as discrimination and gender stereotyping. This includes the notion that men are generally better than women (Moraes et al., 2022). Currently women occupy about 32% of top positions around the globe (Women in Business, 2022) and only a maximum of 29% of women in South Africa are in top management (Mtembu, 2022).

Research shows that appointing women to top management roles is not just about the equality that is sought in a country but is important for sustainable national development, and results in increased Gross domestic product, otherwise the economy of the country will suffer (Jauhar & Lau, 2018). Women need to participate in economic activity because they bring new opportunities and since they are from different backgrounds, they bring different perspectives to help resolve issues (Tahir et al., 2021).

Another barrier was the organizational culture which plays a big role in progressing women to the top which is highlighted in this research (Babic & Hansez, 2021). It is observed that if the management of the organization is dominated by males in top management roles, there is a tendency that the economic landscape of that organisation is geared to favour the presence of men more than women (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). The other barrier includes the perception that women are homemakers and that they are not available to work overtime and thus should not be given top management positions because they will prioritize their family responsibilities (Jauhar & Lau, 2018).

With all these barriers identified, there is not sufficient solutions given of how women in South Africa can overcome these barriers and what policy makers and practitioners can do to ensure adherence to the implemented laws. If our economy is to grow, we need more women in top management.

### 1.4 Research objectives

To highlight the barriers that already exist and prevent women from ascending the career ladder and to identify what HR and policy makers can do to empower and advance more women in top management roles in South Africa.

### 1.5 Research questions

- Why are there still few women in top management in South African organizations?
- What can HR and senior management do to enable women to reach top management?
- What has been done in South African organizations to address barriers that prevent women to advance to top management?

### 1.6 Justification of the study

This research will provide information about how the existing barriers may be overcome through the support of the organization, and how senior managers and Human Resources practitioners can use that knowledge to promote an organizational culture that will be more accepting of women in top management and offer programs and services that will support these.

Much has been written about the barriers, but there is little information on how to overcome them so this research will provide new information or add further insights to existing literature that will bring awareness to academia to educate others of factors that have been used by those who overcame the barriers. There will also be an increased awareness in academia of the gaps that may still exist and that may need to be researched further.

The aim of the study is to also investigate if the glass ceiling can be retracted by those believed to have to ability to open this glass ceiling and enable eligible women to occupy the seats in top management roles they rightfully deserve. This could mean that there are people with the "keys" that can open or retract this glass ceiling and allow women in top management roles.

### 1.7 Delimitation of the study

This study will only focus on men and women in the South African business environment. The women and men that will be interviewed will be from different sectors in Johannesburg South Africa. These sectors include Financial, Construction, Information and Communication Technologies, among others. This is a limitation to the study because companies and industries are different, which may be difficult to compare with one another.

The study focused on successful women in top management roles that have already overcome the barriers and are willing to share their experience, as well as men in top management who are aware of this glass ceiling. The study is qualitative and is based on the response from the people interviewed.

It should be noted that there are many frameworks that may be applicable to this study but a maximum of two frameworks have been reviewed in detail to find answers to the research questions. It is worth noting that there are additional barriers that continue to be identified but for the purposes of this research only the ones listed above will be focused on.

### 1.8 Operational definitions

Glass ceiling: this term was crafted back in 1970 and was in the New York Times newspaper and there have been many authors since who have used this term such as Schuler and Huber

(1993) who defined the word as an invisible barrier which is unbreakable and directed to women and minorities.

The following definitions were from 35 textbooks from Human resource management: In 1996, Werther and Davis (1996) and Mathis and Jackson (2011) described it as a barrier that is real but not seen such as discrimination, which prevents women from attaining senior positions in different levels in an organization in their career. In 2018, Dessler brought a different meaning to the word to include subtle and not-so-subtle barriers to women's career progress (Opatha, 2020).

Gender stereotype: it is a psycho-social process whereby beliefs about personal attributes of men and women are illustrated (Chakraborty & Chatterjee, 2021).

Barriers: defined as those things that make access to services for certain individuals or groups difficult or that prevent those individuals or groups from accessing them (Gopal, 2022).

Top Management: It refers to senior level managers that are responsible for using the organization's resources and take advantage of business opportunities to get the organization to operate at high levels. This can refer to Chief executive officer, Board of Directors, and other high-ranking managers (Mayende & Joseph, 2020).

These definitions will be used to define the barriers that have been identified in multiple papers and show how these factors add to the exclusion of women in top management. They will also be used to explain what can be done in instances where these are identified. They will also be used in conjunction with the theoretical frameworks applicable to them and will be used to select the most appropriate framework that I will be using to find answers to my research questions.

### 1.9 Structure of the dissertation

The research will be conducted by interviewing successful women in South Africa that managed to advance to top management to find out how they managed to overcome the barriers,

and men in top management that may be able to indicate what they see as barriers that women need to overcome to obtain roles in top management and what they can do to overcome them.

## Chapter 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Introduction

Women continue to be the least represented gender in top management around the globe and this is not only applicable in countries that are economically struggling but is applicable even in prosperous countries like Sweden (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022). The same observation has also been made in the higher learning sector in South Africa (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021).

Through previous research, several barriers have been identified that are still relevant today and continue to prevent women from ascending into top management roles. Some literature has identified measures that might be put in place to overcome some of these barriers, and these have been investigated to see if they were successful in the organisations where they were implemented. Literature has been reviewed to identify if new barriers have been identified and if measures exist to overcome them.

### 2.2 Empirical review

Some of the barriers identified include organizational culture, gender stereotypes, the glass ceiling and lack of mentorship. These topics were found in multiple research papers and this research paper will be focused on these few factors. There are many other barriers that were identified but for the purpose of this research, only these will be discussed in detail. In the theoretical framework section, an analysis of different theories related to these barriers or factors will be explored and one or two of the theories will be used in the rest of this research paper.

There has been substantial evidence from different scholars and researchers that there are multiple benefits that organizations can derive where women are highly represented in top management (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022). Legislation and formalised procedures for those who are being discriminated against were other suggestions (Oppong & Bannor, 2022).

There have been several suggestions from literature for politicians to be involved in retracting this glass ceiling by reserving quotas for women representation in organisation's top management. It is believed that if deliberate efforts are made to reserve several positions in top management for women, there will be a concerted effort to accommodate them (Akkaya, 2020). Khwela et al (2020) believe that government must has a role to play in enforcing laws to promote women into top echelons in the organisations.

### 2.2.1 Organizational culture

Organizational culture was identified as one of the barriers that prevent the advancement of women to top management (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). It is believed that because of the patriarchal structure which can be gender based, there might be a tendency for men to hire other men because they are believed to be better than women. If the organisation's culture does not promote gender equality, then the masculine culture will continue to limit the women in that organization to reach top management (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022).

Organizational culture is defined as the way employees interact with each other in terms of how they work and communicate with others in the organisation. It is a system of attitudes, norms, and values that the organization has established through experiences which directs how they behave (Alagan & Mangalam, 2022).

It was found that the organizational culture and policies may not be accommodating for women because men have been in top management as decision makers for a longer period and as a result the culture and at times even the job descriptions are more applicable to them (Akkaya, 2020).

### 2.2.2 Gender stereotype

Gender stereotype is defined as a psycho-social process whereby beliefs about personal attributes of men and women are illustrated (Chakraborty & Chatterjee, 2021). It is confirmed to be one of the barriers that women face before they can be appointed in top management roles (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022) and has resulted in women having to work harder than men to prove their capability in the same positions (Jauhar & Lau, 2018).

Despite having more women in the workplace, they are still expected to be caregivers and to raise a family while at the same time expected to perform well in their careers, which becomes an unfavorable factor that affects women's eligibility in the organization when deciding to place them in top management (decision making) roles unlike their counterparts who are men (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022).

Gender and power relations have been identified as factors that influence the advancement of women because of the social structures that exist where men are automatically expected to be in positions of power unlike women (Oppong & Bannor, 2022) in the African and Asian environment, and this was also observed by Jangren and Jonsson (2022) who also agree that there are bias-driven factors that prevent women from progressing to the top in the workplace. According to Mankayi and Cheteni (2022) gender stereotype is ranked the biggest challenge for women to climb the corporate ladder and it is believed that it mostly stems from the sexual division of labor where different roles were expected to be performed by a certain gender.

### 2.2.3 Glass ceiling

Another phenomenon that has been identified as a barrier is called the glass ceiling which has been described as an invisible barrier or obstacle that blocks women from moving upward in their careers into top management roles (Hussin et al., 2021). This term was crafted back in 1970's by Marilyn Loden in the Women's exposition in New York (Vargas, 2018) and there have been many authors since who have used this term such as Schuler and Huber (1993) who defined the word as an invisible barrier which is unbreakable and directed to women and minorities (Kapoor et al., 2021).

The following definitions were from 35 textbooks from Human resource management: According to Werther and Davis (1996) and Mathis and Jackson (2011) they described it as a barrier that is real but not seen, such as discrimination which prevents women from attaining senior positions in different levels in an organization in their career (Opatha, 2020).
In 2018, Dessler brought a different meaning to the word to include subtle and not-so-subtle barriers to women's career progress (Opatha, 2020). Another definition for the glass ceiling includes the non-success of women to obtain top management roles in large numbers. This metaphor is evidenced by the low number of women that are in top management roles despite

their qualifications and accomplishments (Khwela et al., 2020). To break down the word further, the glass is used to describe the barriers that are subtle and transparent but that are not obviously visible to other people, and the ceiling describes the highest echelon which women can climb in the organizational (Akkaya, 2020).

These authors have identified that women find it hard to climb to the top of the corporate ladder because this ceiling came into existence because men have been leading the organizations for so long that they do not trust the women to lead the organization (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022). There is also an observation from the literature that suggests that the glass ceiling emanates from the historical patriarchal society and that it is more visible in the private sector (Khwela et al., 2020).

The glass ceiling has also been described as structural factors that are based on gender that influence the decisions when recruiting and promoting individuals. It has also been described as the failure of women to access top management positions (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022). It is believed that the glass ceiling is a phenomenon which is supported by evidence and is usually a result of unconscious bias and can become a problem in organizational culture (Chigudu, 2021).

### 2.2.4 Mentorship

Research has identified that women could break the barrier into top management positions through mentorship which involves having someone that can assist with preparing women for the roles in top management, assisting with the transition for new women into top management positions and encourage and assist them to learn the ropes in top management (Khwela et al., 2020). These same sentiments were shared by Mankayi and Cheteni (2021) based on the results of their research where they found out that 50% of those interviewed believed that this intervention from those who have overcome this barrier before would be extremely helpful.

In the education sector in Zimbabwe, mentoring was one of the factors that can be used to break the glass ceiling (Machibaya & Ndamba, 2022). Findings in the banking sector in South Africa indicated that 8 out 9 respondents believed that mentorship played a big role in their promotion

and that through mentorship there is a higher likelihood of women in top management (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021).

## 2.3 Research gaps

The following questions, and further questions for clarity, will be addressed by the literature review or researched further if answers are still not available after reviewing the literature.

### 2.3.1 Research question 1

- Why are there still fewer women in top management in South African organization?

#### 2.3.1.1 Gender stereotype

Taking in to account the definition of gender stereotype, it is evident that this still affects the promotion of women even today. Despite the identification of this barrier in past research it is prevalent today and we still live in patriarchal society which is evident of the latest number of women in top management. Recent research shows that in the US, women represent 54% of the workforce but only 35% are in senior positions while only 8.8% are lead the Fortune 500 companies (Ariella, 2022).

According to a report from PWC, women only lead 7 out of 100 top companies listed on the JSE, and only 8% of all listed companies on the JSE are led by women (Ebrahimi, 2022). There is no doubt that there is more work to be done to bring more women to the top echelons in the workplace. In this report it also shows that in the period January 2020 to June 2022, there were 208 executive appointments but only 25% of those appointed were women (Ebrahimi, 2022). It is evident that women are still not being considered as capable as men when it comes to recruitment, and this could confirm that gender stereotype is still prevalent.

With the gender stereotype factors, it is still believed that women are expected to change their management style to fit in with the males and that if they do not change, they are labeled as weak (Nair, 2023). In an effort to overcome this barrier, the CEO and top executives of an American technology company called Corning Incorporated attended a gender training program. They then had 3 years to implement the lessons they had learned with support from

the company to teams that focused on matters related to women. In another company, Teneco Incorporated, executives were awarded bonuses based on the progress in promoting women (Hagevall, 2021).

#### 2.3.1.2 Individual factors

Research has identified that individual factors need to be addressed as part of removing the barriers. There are things that an organisation can do to help remove these barriers, but it has been found that the women also need to have determination, high confidence levels, be hardworking and ambitious, among others, to be successful as indicated by Nair (2023) and Hagevall (2021). In addition, women who want to be in top management need to have a positive attitude and personality (Machibaya & Ndamba, 2023).

From the research, another individual factor that affects the progression of women is work life balance. This is defined as being the satisfaction obtained for being able to function at home and at work with little conflict in the roles (Nair, 2023). Male employers at times perceive that women will not be able to manage the pressure of work and their family life which increases the likelihood of them not being the preferred (Alagan & Mangalam, 2022). Because of the expectation for top managers to be available after hours, this can be seen as a challenge and a barrier that male employers might not want to accept (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Women need to have family support and support from management to be able to navigate this individual factor which might include having flexible hours of work (Akkaya, 2020).

#### 2.3.1.2 Hypothesis

There are things that women can do to retract the glass ceiling and prepare themselves for future roles in top management. This includes gaining the required education, and having the right attitude, determination, and self-confidence among other things. They need to be hardworking with the understanding that it will take more from them to prove themselves to their male counterparts. This study will ascertain if having these attributes will have more impact on removing the barriers and making top management more accessible for women or not. It will be investigated if having these attributes changes the men's perspectives about women in leadership or not.

### 2.3.2 Research question 2

- What can HR and senior management do to enable capable women to go up the corporate ladder into top management?

#### 2.3.2.1 Mentorship

Research identifies that mentorship plays a role in the advancement of women to top management. It was found that lack of support to women in terms of mentorship from the organization and not having a role model continued to be a barrier for women (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). In instances where mentorship was available, the participants indicated that they were able to look up to other women who had succeeded before them and they had a role model they could follow (Machibaya & Ndamba, 2022). This was also observed in the banking sector in South Africa even though it was found that there were more male career sponsors in that space which may be difficult because men preferred to mentor other men (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021).

Because men have been in senior positions of an organization and have been decision makers and policy makers, some of their policies and even job descriptions are not made with the women in mind, and as a result, are not as accommodating for women (Akkaya, 2020).

Senior management and Human resources can be instrumental in addressing the issue of mentoring and sponsoring for women. They can implement programs that will encourage male senior leaders to unlearn the gender stereotypes and learn to value women in their top management group. They can also introduce rewards for those managers that deliberately increase the presence of women in their leadership circle.

#### 2.3.2.2 Organizational culture

Organizational culture is the assumption, norms, values, and attitudes that employees of an organization use to govern how they react to situations and behave. This also includes the way employees interact with each other and with others outside of their organization (Hussin et al., 2021). According to Akkaya (2020) and Nair (2023) research indicates that because men have

been involved in the running of organizations for long, the culture of organizations has been shaped by the male perspective which at times can be exclusive of women in the workplace. This is evident in the way that recruitment is done in some organizations. The job adverts are prepared with the male gender in mind and even though it is not explicitly stated that the position is suitable for a male, females stand less of a chance to be appointed in those positions however, there has been some improvement by other organizations to improve the policies and practices to be more accommodating to all genders, including their hiring processes and job descriptions to be more inclusive and promote equality (Dosunmu & Dichaba 2023).

#### 2.3.2.3 Hypothesis

It is evident that the barriers preventing women from top management are known and more continue to be exposed but there is clearly extraordinarily little information available on what organisations can do and what measures can be taken to remove them from preventing the advancement of women. As a result, more research will need to be done to find these answers and add new knowledge for policy makers and senior management to navigate this.

### 2.3.3 Research question 3

- What has been done in South African organizations to address barriers that prevent women to advance to top management?

#### 2.3.3.1 Policy makers

There have been suggestions from different studies that suggest that government should implement quotas and enforce a law for several top management positions to be reserved for women (Akkaya, 2020). In another study it was suggested that government must promote gender equality in top management levels through its laws (Khwela et al., 2020).
It is believed that formal compliant procedures for victims that have been discriminated against must be established. This will allow for organisations to be aware of what is happening in the organization and for those who are not compliant to be addressed (Oppong & Bannor, 2022).

#### 2.3.3.2 Hypothesis

Despite South Africa having the Employment Equity Act it is evident that merely having legislation in place will not necessarily change the outlook for women in top management but perhaps the procedure to report discrimination against women must be implemented. Further research will be performed to confirm this.

There are many barriers that have been identified and it is clear that even with the legislations available, there is still not enough women in top management and this needs to be addressed further with new knowledge.

## 2.4 Theoretical frameworks

The section below discusses the various theories that will inform the study – followed by the conceptual framework.

### 2.4.1 Gender stereotypes

It is clear from the literature that gender stereotype continues to be a challenge that women in the workforce face even today. Different theories will be used below to discuss how they relate to this concept. According to Grant Thornton's 2022 report (Women in Business, 2022.) women hold 32% of positions in top management around the globe, despite only 20-29% of women in South being in top management positions (Mtembu, 2022).

#### 2.4.1.1 Gender stereotype and Expectation States theory

The Expectation States theory states that there is a belief in society that men are more competent than women as a result there is a preference to recruit more men than women. The theory emphasizes a link between leadership and social hierarchy (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022). This theory was formulated in the 1950's by Bales who observed the interaction of homogenous college students where there was no structure of leadership established and how with time different levels of inequality in interaction eventually formed, which did not exist before, and in time status hierarchy's form. This theory was further defined as "power and structures" by Berger and his colleagues (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006).

This theory explains the "power and prestige structure" or the "status structure" and how people are eventually classified based on their status, gender, or social standing. According to Crossman (2020), the expectations states theory is a way of understanding how people's capabilities are evaluated by others based on specific skills and status characteristics like gender and race. This can be based on known information they might have or implicit assumptions. The theory also found that the assumptions made were most likely related to someone's gender, race, or education, etc.

This theory shows that at times in the workplace, women are just discriminated against and not given opportunities to hold positions in top management because of their gender and thus their capability to perform is not based on their skills. This theory proves that there is still a belief that men are better than women just because of their gender. This will be researched further to understand especially what can be done to disrupt this thinking and assumption.

#### 2.4.1.2 Gender stereotype and Social role theory

Another theory used to explain gender stereotype is social role theory, which can also be used to explain the prejudice that women face in the workplace because of their gender. This theory is underlined by the principle that the differences between men and women stems from their social roles in society. This theory by Eagly in 1987 characterizes the society based on the division of labor (Eagly & Wood, 2016).

This theory also suggests that there is predetermined appropriate and inappropriate behaviour for each gender. For instance, in general, women are expected to be working in the home, be nurturers in the family and communal while the men are expected to provide for the family and be in position of power and status, which would normally be outside the home (Nair, 2023).

In some instances, positions are portrayed to be gender based such as teachers mostly being women and the profession for lawyers and doctors is portrayed to be for the males. This can be a challenge where women want to work outside of the home as that can be construed to be inappropriate behavior (Alqahtani, 2020).

Another concept associated with this theory is that people tend to seek to associate with those that are like them known as the homophily principle. Given this principle it is reasonable to assume that since we live in a patriarchal society where majority of those in top management are men, there might be a tendency for them to prefer collaborating with other men in top management which will lead to the exclusion or limitation of women in upper echelons in the workplace (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022).

The social role theory was used by Sheryl Sandberg in the book titled Lean In where she highlighted that gender stereotypes portrayed women as communal and focused on family responsibilities unlike men who were considered to be assertive and natural leaders. She used this theory to challenge these preconceptions and inspired women to go against the misconception and follow their professional aspirations. She inspired women to "lean in" which she described as going for what they want and taking risks, including seeking for leadership roles without considering the gender biases. She ran a campaign in partnership with other organizations to empower women with tools needed to overcome gender biases and by fostering leadership qualities and fighting for workplace equality. This campaign received a lot of attention and encouraged decision makers and policy makers to create a more equitable and inclusive work environment (Sandberg, 2015).

### 2.4.1.3 Gender stereotype and Feminist theory

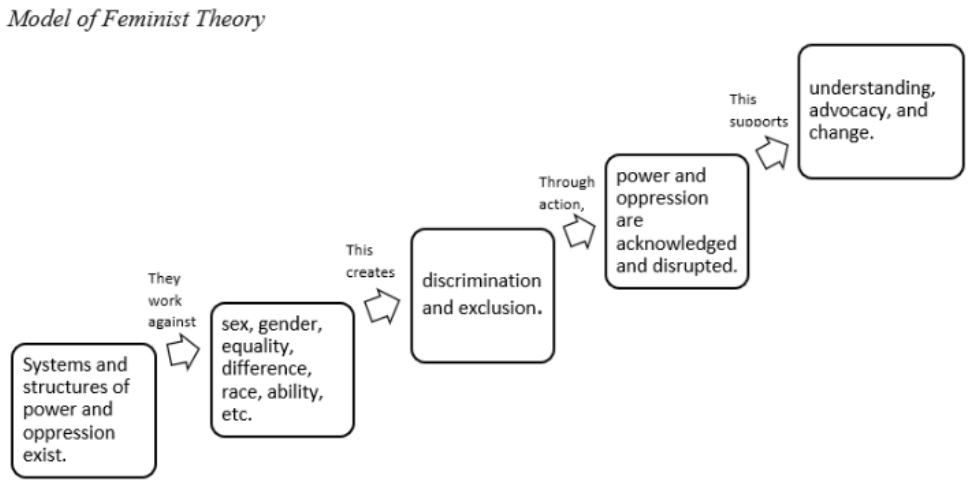


**Figure 2.1: Model of Feminist Theory** (Arinder, n.d.)

Feminist theory challenges the traditional philosophy and includes different ideas that addresses the inequality that women face in the world imposed by a patriarchal society and seeks to find new ways that women can be allowed equality, justice, and fairness (Tong, 2001). Figure 1 explains the steps in the theory and highlights the power and status inequalities between men and women, the fact that gender roles and inequalities are often socially constructed, and bringing an awareness of the patriarchal society in which women are dominated through social structure and practices (Guy-Evans, 2023).

This theory was used effectively to address the glass ceiling in the "Ban Bossy" campaign in the US where assertive girls and women were negatively stereotyped especially in leadership roles. The campaign highlighted that girls and women were labeled as bossy whenever they exhibited leadership qualities with the same label not attributed to boys but instead were encouraged and praised for such qualities. The campaign aimed to change the narrative that assertiveness and leadership was for boys and not for girls. This was done through public service announcements and partnering with influencers (Sandberg & Barksdale, 2023)

### 2.4.2 Glass ceiling

The word glass ceiling refers to the visible and invisible barriers that prevent women from advancing to top management (Hussin et al., 2021) . The word "glass" describes the situation or challenges which women must face to reach the upper echelons but are not visible to all in a clear way and the ceiling refers to the lack of advancement to upper echelons (Nair, 2023).

In some organizations there is a so called "old boy's network" which excludes women from the social circles and thus leads to a culture where the male senior managers tend to accept men in their circle (Hagevall, 2021). This adds an additional layer that women must work to break for them to advance to top management.

#### 2.4.2.1 Glass ceiling and the feminist theory

The feminist theory seeks to address the inequality that women face in the workplace when they need to advance to top management and seeks to elevate women to have equal rights to education, jobs, and salaries. Through this theory, organizations can try to ensure that changes

are made to allow all employees a fair and equal chance for them to advance to whatever level of position they want to attain (Callistus-Ojirika & Owhondah, 2021).

An example is the "Accelerating Women's Representation in Leadership" initiative of the South African Chapter of the International Women's Forum (IWF), an international group called the International Women's Forum that advocates for women's growth and leadership in many fields. The IWF Chapter in South Africa created a program that is intended to address the "glass ceiling" and boost the presence of women in positions of leadership. The program challenges institutional biases and impediments that prevent women from advancing in the workplace. It acknowledges the need for organizational structural and cultural change to foster inclusive work settings that promote women's growth. It offers mentoring, networking opportunities, and leadership development programs for women in diverse industries where the main goal is to give women the confidence they need to face challenges, grow as leaders, and create networks of business contacts.

The curriculum attempts to challenge conventional gender norms, biases, and discriminatory practices that support the glass ceiling by utilizing feminist philosophy. It promotes equal opportunity, dispels gender stereotypes, and creates a welcoming environment where women can flourish and take on leadership positions, and challenges institutional biases and impediments that prevent women from advancing in the workplace. It acknowledges the need for organizational structural and cultural change to foster inclusive work settings that promote women's growth (IWFSA, n.d.)

#### 2.4.2.2 Glass ceiling and the social role theory

The glass ceiling is relevant to women which shows that there is a gender that is being discriminated against. This could be due to the policies that exist in the organization, or it could be based on the stereotype assigned to skills of men and women and them being seen as different and unequal (Chaudhary et al., 2021). The social role theory addresses these issues since labor is divided according to gender. This theory recognizes that there are barriers that may exist purely because of how the work is socialized and divided and because of the expectation that certain genders can be allowed in certain positions while others are not.

The Gender Equality Seal Certification Program implemented by the International Labor Organisation (ILO) is to enhance gender equality and remove obstacles that prevent women from advancing in the workplace. To comprehend the mechanisms that lead to the glass ceiling phenomena, the curriculum makes use of social role theory, which highlights the societal expectations and norms given to various genders. The program's main objective is to change workplace cultures and procedures in order to question conventional gender norms and improve fair possibilities for women's career advancement. It aims to eliminate the prejudices and misconceptions that prevent women from obtaining higher-level jobs and leadership responsibilities. Participating organizations are directed to examine their policies, procedures, and organizational culture through a gender perspective through the Gender Equality Seal Certification Program (Gender Equality Seal, n.d.).

### 2.4.3 Organizational culture

The way an organization's employees associate with each other and with other external parties is the organization's culture. It includes the assumptions, values, attitudes, and norms they embrace and governs how they behave. The organization's culture has a bearing on how gender difference and power relations influence what the organization considers to be an ideal candidate (Hussin et al., 2021). The culture includes the way the employees define and consider the importance of gender equality (Hagevall, 2021). Most of the organizations have been led by men from long ago and so the culture of the organization is more aligned to having men in decision making roles which can be excluding to women.

If the organization's culture is not one of inclusion, then women may find that their voices are not heard, and their opinions are undermined. It is therefore an organization's prerogative to have an accommodating culture for all genders (Hussin et al., 2021).

#### 2.4.3.1 Organizational culture and Feminist theory

The feminist theory can be used to identify the challenges being faced by women due to the culture of the organization and find ways to create a more inclusive environment for all. Depending on the culture of the organization, women may still find themselves in an unfavorable position due to the stereotyping that may exist in the organization. The perceptions

of individuals in the organization may be negative towards women. Opinions that employees of a company hold and their attitude towards gender roles form part of the culture of the organization (Alagan & Mangalam, 2022).

The feminist theory can be used to change the opinions and beliefs by creating an opportunity for the decision makers to create a more accommodating culture for all genders.

### 2.4.4 Individual factors

An individuals' character and personality can become a barrier to advancement in their career compared to others. This can be true where the woman lacks self-confidence and is not in control of their emotions (Hussin et al., 2021). There are traits that women are expected to possess for them to be considered in top management such as motivation, self-confidence, problem-solving skills, leadership skills, and qualifications but having these does not guarantee that one will advance higher because they still must prove themselves in proper forums and be able to express themselves well (Nair, 2023). Hagevall (2022) also confirms that the woman's self-confidence is important and how they view themselves when applying for positions in top management.

Women are at times believed to be their own enemy to progress to higher positions (Callistus-Ojirika & Owhondah, 2021). But having said that, it is sometimes because of the choices women make to take care of their families instead of climbing the corporate ladder that ends up becoming a barrier to progress. This is also brought about because that is what is expected of women at times, that they sacrifice their success for the family unlike men (Khwela et al., 2020).

## 2.5 Rationale of the theory

The purpose of this study continues to be about retracting the glass ceiling for women to advance to top management positions. The literature reviewed continues to relate the barriers that exist, but little has been done to find ways to retract this glass ceiling. The concept of the glass ceiling has been defined and continues to be used extensively in literature and is well explained by all to mean the same thing. The phenomena of the glass ceiling continue to be

experienced by the female gender and creates questions about gender equality. The literature reviewed was from different countries and different industries and sectors and the same pain is being felt.

Different theories have been explored and although most of them address this issue with the glass ceiling phenomena, but the theories of choice for this study will be the Social role theory and the Feminist theory. The Social theory explains where the problem with gender inequality begins and how it came about, and the feminist theory helps identify solutions to how we can address this issue and allow women the same opportunity for growth to higher positions like men.

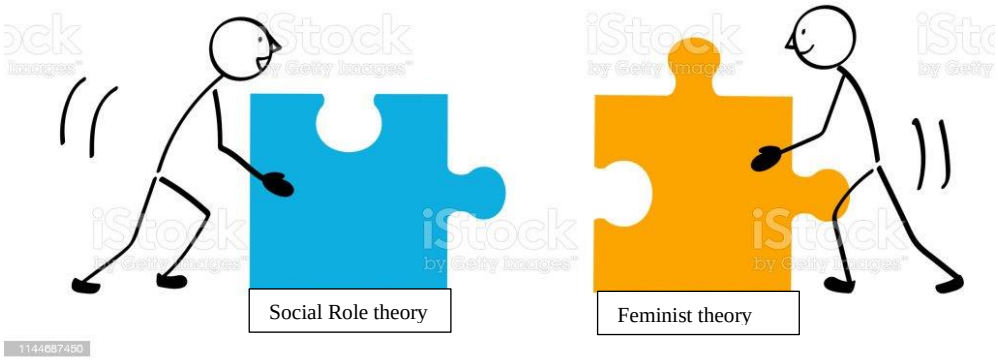


**Figure 2.2: Social Role and Feminist Theory:** (DragonTiger, 2019)

Together, Social Role Theory and Feminist Theory can effectively address gender inequality since they offer different but complimentary views on the problem. According to the Social Role Theory (Eagly et al., 2000), societal expectations and norms have an impact on people's behavior as well as the gender-based division of work. Feminist theory, on the other hand, emphasizes resolving power disparities and promoting women's rights and gender equality (Reeser, 2015).

Researchers can better comprehend the intricate dynamics that sustain gender disparity by combining these two theories. The Social Role Theory emphasizes how socialization processes shape people's behaviors and expectations by constructing and reinforcing gender roles (Eagly et al., 2000). The Feminist theory improves this understanding by examining the underlying

power structures and systematic biases that contribute to gender inequality. It focuses on resolving problems including gender inequality and discrimination based on gender. Feminist philosophy recognizes the uneven distribution of power between genders and offers a framework to confront these disparities and promote change.

By incorporating these theories, researchers are encouraged to investigate how social roles influence people's experiences in particular circumstances, while also considering the larger societal structures that support gender inequity. Studies could, for instance, examine how traditional gender roles affect women's employment possibilities and choices in industries with a preponderance of men, as well as examine the institutionalized biases and impediments that prevent women from advancing.

Combining these theories can also guide effective gender equality promotion initiatives. Recognizing the impact of social roles allows treatments to concentrate on dispelling gender stereotypes, supporting diverse role models, and giving everyone the same opportunity regardless of gender. Adding feminist ideas helps guarantee that interventions address structural barriers and power disparities to bring about long-lasting change.

### 2.6 Summary of literature

In conclusion, combining feminist theory and social role theory in research offers a whole framework for comprehending and addressing gender disparity. While feminist theory looks at power inequalities and systemic prejudices, social role theory explains how socialization and gender roles affect how people behave. Researchers can create a more sophisticated knowledge of the complexity of gender inequality and inform treatments by utilizing both perspectives.

The aim of the study is to add new knowledge to academia and policy makers on how these barriers can be removed and how women can be given a fair chance to ascend the career ladder. This will be supported by the feminist theory which brings to light the systems that oppress women, calls for understanding of how these systems and concepts affect the progress of women and how changing perspectives about gender make it possible for all genders to have an equal chance.

## Chapter 3 Research methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide the methods and procedure that will be employed to collect and analyse data and outlines the approach that will be taken to ensure that the findings in this study are reliable. The selected tools and collected data used will be vital to the interpretation of the results when research questions are answered. This section will focus on the approach, the design, how participants are selected, the method used to collect data and the tools that will be used to analyse the data.

### 3.2 Research Approach

This study will adopt the qualitative method because this methodology entails a thorough investigation and interpretation of people's perspectives, subjective experiences, and other social factors (Levitt et al., 2018). It goes beyond the statistics and more in-depth into understanding complex issues through interviews (Braun et al., 2022). This will assist with richer meaning and interpretation to the issues that affect women in relation to being in top management. This will highlight the unique experiences that women from different backgrounds face. Other than the other two methods, quantitative and mixed method, this method is flexible and adaptable in examining the underlying problems and offers a complex view that cannot be represented through quantitative measures alone. This is possible by using open-ended questions and allowing the participants to describe the experience in their own words (Creswell et al., 2007).

### 3.3 Research Paradigm

To gain more insight in the study, the constructivist paradigm will be utilized which is an approach that affirms that people gain understanding and knowledge of things in the world through their personal experience (Adom et al., 2016). This approach recognizes that the interpretation of reality by individuals is subjective and considers the importance of the context within which the reality is interpreted (Creswell, 2014). This paradigm is most suitable because it considers that individuals have different perspectives and experiences that affect how they approach the assignments.

Data will be gathered by interviewing women and men that are in top management in Johannesburg, South Africa. Purposive sampling will be used to capture as many different perspectives and experiences as possible from these individuals. Using the thematic approach data will be divided into themes and patterns to identify common trends and answers (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The data analysis steps will include data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching, and reviewing of themes, defining, and naming of themes and finally producing a report.

### 3.4 Research Design

Due to the nature of the study, a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) will be applied because it focuses on understanding the participant's experiences and perception concerning this glass ceiling phenomena (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). The responses will then be sorted into themes which identify the trends and draw conclusions which can then be used to recommend solutions to the glass ceiling phenomena.

### 3.5 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews will be used to collect the data. The audio from the interviews will be recorded after the participant's consent is received. After the recording they will be transcribed verbatim. This approach allows for participants to freely share their experiences as they moved into the upper echelons of management, for the women, and their observations or suggestions of what can be done to remove these barriers. The men's perspective will also be valuable as they also take time to consider the same questions and give their opinions on what women can do to remove this barrier. This approach will assist in getting different perspectives from women who might feel they are being discriminated against by those with recruiting powers, while the men might give reasons why they would rather employ other males than women in top management.

The information that will be gathered will be important in academia and to policymakers because it will add new knowledge to available research and can be used as a solution in future. This will also allow decision makers to make well-informed decisions based on reliable information. The semi-structured interviews are used because they provide large volumes of data, they are flexible and can be relied on. The challenge with the interviews is that they can

be difficult to analyse if the questions are open-ended, it can be difficult to compare answers as everyone shares their perspective and experience and the honesty of participants cannot always be guaranteed.

### 3.5.1 Population

The population consisted of females and males that are in top management from different organizations in Johannesburg. The population consisted of people that are believed to be experienced in this subject matter and that can give valuable insight to the phenomena of the glass ceiling.

### 3.5.2 Sample and sampling design

Purposive sampling, also known as the non-probability sampling technique or judgement sampling, was the most appropriate choice because the participants were expected to have experience in the phenomena. The convenience sampling was used to select those participants that will be available based on proximity and geography (Hussin et al., 2021). The sample included 11 participants from the total population who come from different backgrounds, industries, and sectors. The industries concerned are Information technology, financial services, Non-profit organisation, Construction, Marketing and Property management.

Upon selection of these individuals, personal invitations were extended over the phone and face-to-face where possible to request for their participation.

### 3.5.3 Research Instruments and data collection procedure

For purposes of this study an interview guide was used to collect the data. The interviewer did not share the interview questions with the participants in advance to avoid crafted answers. A copy of the interview schedule has been attached as an appendix to this document.

The interview questions were structured as follows:

1. Why are there still fewer women in top management positions.

- the aim of this question is to gain the participant's perspective on why they believe this is still the position of women in South Africa

2. What can HR and senior management do to enable women to reach top management?

- This aim is to gather knowledge on what these managers have already done to enable more women in top management.

3. What has been done by your organisation to address barriers that prevent women to advance to top management?

- This was to identify what has already been done to address this issue.

The data was collected through face-to-face interviews where possible, or online using Zoom or Microsoft Teams where participants were out of the province for extended periods or not available due to other commitments. Face to face interviews were preferred because it allowed the interviewer to see the non-verbal expressions from the Participant and enabled the interviewer to see their emotions during the interview which might be difficult to read over technology.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

The thematic analysis was used to analyse the results from the interviews. This involved recognizing emerging patterns and themes and using that to address the research questions in-depth. This does not imply just summarizing the data, but it includes interpreting the data for deeper insights. The interviewer used the inductive approach to gain new insight into the glass ceiling phenomena and used that to develop a new theory. The following diagram outlines how the thematic approach was used.

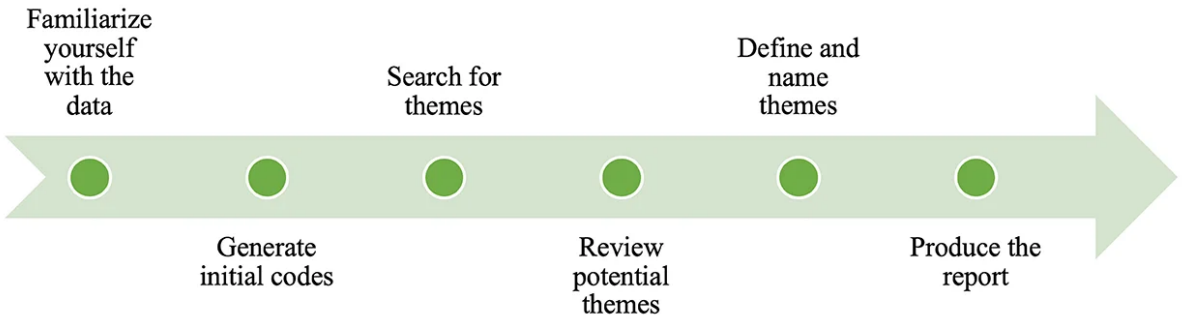


**Figure 3.1 - Six-phase Thematic Analytic process** (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Using the thematic approach, the researcher used the following steps to organize the data. Once the data was collected the interviewer familiarized themselves with the data and generated initial codes, these were used to search for themes and then followed by reviewing potential themes. The interviewer then defined the themes and assigned names to them which enabled the interviewer to produce a findings report.

### 3.6.1 Pretesting the Research instrument

Before the actual interviews with the selected participants, the interviewer asked the questions in the interview guide to 3 random people that are not necessarily part of the sample, to clarify that the questions were clear and understandable before being used. The people selected were also knowledgeable about the topic and relevant changes would have been made if necessary to make the questions clear and succinct. This was part of piloting the interview schedule.

### 3.6.2 Transferability

Several strategies have been implored to increase the transferability of this study. Firstly, the sample of participants that were selected came from different industries and backgrounds and this allowed for varied responses and perspectives. Secondly, the details of how the participants were selected, how data was collected, and how it was analysed allow for transparency and this can allow a person to confirm if the findings can be suitable in their context. It is believed that these strategies can increase the transferability of the findings to similar studies.

### 3.6.3 Trustworthiness

Semi-structured interviews allowed for participants to express their views, experiences, and perspectives which increased the validity of the findings. Open-ended questions were used during the interview, and this encouraged the participants to share and encouraged in-depth responses. Credibility was enhanced as the interviewer allowed for comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The fact that the interviewer listened attentively to the responses and could engage the participant for further clarification or elaboration also increases the trustworthiness of the data being collected.

### 3.7 Ethical consideration

Informed consent was obtained from all participants and the purpose, aim and objective of the study was thoroughly explained including the process that was followed and that the interviews will be recorded. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The participant's confidentiality is maintained, and any data collected is stored in a password protected laptop to protect their privacy. Any identifiers in the interview have been removed. The research was approved by the Wits Ethics board before proceeding and the interviewer respected all ethical principles and regulations as explained in the Ethics course.

### 3.8 Summary

It is clear from this study that the glass ceiling phenomena still exists nowadays and even though there is a lot of literature on this subject, there are not sufficient solutions of how to resolve this. Through in-depth interviews, the different perceptions and experiences associated with the glass ceiling were explored with the aim to contribute to existing literature on this subject. The results from this study will contribute valuable insights for organizations, policy makers, and individuals who seek to retract this glass ceiling and foster a more inclusive workplace. The ultimate purpose of this study is to promote equality and enable advancement of all individuals in their careers.

## Chapter 4: Findings of the study and discussions

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews. Only men and women who hold top management positions in Johannesburg organisations were interviewed. The participants were asked around their understanding of the glass ceiling, the lack of women in top management positions, enabling women to reach top management, and addressing the barriers that prevent women to advance to top management. The questions were open-ended and allowed the respondents to refer to their personal experiences with the glass ceiling and assist in identifying the possible solutions. Several themes on how to enable women to advance to top management and break the glass ceiling emerged from these interviews.

## 4.2 Findings

Applying the six-phase Thematic Analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it was possible to identify themes based on the responses from the interviews. A total of eleven respondents were interviewed and 3 of them were men while 8 were women who are all in top management positions in their organisations. All the participants were above the age of 40 and had more than 10 years' working experience. The demographics of the individuals that were interviewed are as follows:

| Participants | Gender | Industry |
|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | Female | Banking |
| Participant 2 | Female | Insurance |
| Participant 3 | Female | Insurance |
| Participant 4 | Female | Construction |
| Participant 5 | Female | Insurance |
| Participant 6 | Female | Facilities management |
| Participant 7 | Female | Marketing |
| Participant 8 | Female | Information technology |
| Participant 9 | Male | Banking |
| Participant 10 | Male | Property management |
| Participant 11 | Male | Financial services |

**Table 4.1: Interview questions, key literature concepts, and emerging themes**

| Interview questions | Literature concept | Emerging themes |
|---|---|---|
| Why are there still fewer women in top management in South African organisations? | Women continue to be marginalized because of gender stereotypes (Chakraborty & Chatterjee, 2021) | Lack of self-confidence and impostor syndrome<br>Lack of intention from organisations<br>Women being undermined |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Why do you think this is the case? | Organisational culture is a barrier since the space is not accommodating to women (Alagan & Mangalam, 2022) | Corporate space not made for women<br>Boy's club – Maintaining status quo<br>Women not wanting the roles |
| What in your opinion has resulted in this? | Bias-driven factors continue to prevent women reaching top management positions (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022) | Biases from men and culture<br>History and patriarchal society |
| What can HR and senior management do to enable women to reach top management? | | Be intentional<br>Have targets<br>Create an environment suitable for women |
| Describe some of the interventions that can be implemented to empower women | More than 50% of respondents were enabled to reach top management positions through mentorship (Mankayi & Cheteni 2021) | Introduce sponsors, coaching, mentoring and other development programs<br>Scorecard targets and quotas<br>Succession planning |
| How effective have interventions been and what will you do to improve these? | | Some were effective and others not |
| What has been done by your organisation to address barriers that prevent women to advance to top management? | Through mentorship there is a higher likelihood of having more women in top management (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021) | Succession planning, mentoring, sponsors, and coaching<br>Development and talent programs |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Where do you think these barriers originate from? | Women need to have a positive attitude, personality, and courage to overcome impostor syndrome (Machibaya & Ndamba, 2023)<br>Akkaya (2020) and Nair (2023) indicate that because men have been involved in the running of organizations for long, the culture of organizations has been shaped by the male perspective and can be exclusive of women in the workplace | Industrialization<br>History and culture<br>Impostor syndrome |
| How do you think these barriers can be overcome? | | Networking<br>Have incentives |

### 4.3 Discussions of key findings

#### 4.3.1 Lack of women in top management positions

Based on the interviews, the respondents agreed that there were still fewer women in top management positions in South Africa. This led to the question about the reason the respondents thought there were fewer women in South Africa. In seeking to understand why there are fewer women in top management positions, the following responses were given by those interviewed and their responses were as follows:

##### 4.3.1.1 Lack of self-confidence

A few of the women felt that there were fewer women in top management positions because women lacked self-confidence and doubted their abilities. They had impostor syndrome which made them not to raise their hands when opportunities were presented. One of the ladies had this to say:

“we have our own issues around our self-doubt and our self-confidence when we come into these spaces and dealing with imposter syndrome and having to kind of go through feeling like we have to go the extra mile to prove ourselves” Interviewee 1

And another said “I still believe that as women, we don't trust ourselves enough, and there's always that voice in our mind” Interviewee 2

Due to this lack of self-belief, the women are not taking up opportunities to be part of the C-suite and be in decision-making positions. They are allowing their limiting beliefs to overrule their skills and capabilities to be in the upper echelons of the organizations.

#### 4.3.1.2 Lack of intention from organisations

Another reason that was given for lack of women in top management was the lack of intention from the organisations. It has been observed by the female respondents that when the organization does not have the intention to make the environment suitable for women, there will continue to be fewer women in top management. Organizations need to look inside and determine if they have challenges with having women in top management positions and if they recognize that, they need to be willing to change and accommodate women.

“The company still does not show the intention or have the intention to remove it.” Interviewee 3

“And also, I guess been quite intentional in recognizing where you do have a challenge, you know? We have a gender imbalance in our business.” Interviewee 11

This speaks to the fact that organisations need to make an effort to change the landscape it has always kept when there were mostly men in the corporate space and need to consciously make it accommodating for women. Because organisations have been run by men for so long, it is important that they realize that women need to occupy some of the roles in the upper echelons and make it possible for them to do so.

#### 4.3.1.3 Biases and being undermined

Another reason given was that women were still being undermined by the men and there are still instances where men believe the women still need to be at home and that they are less capable and competent than men. This speaks to the gender stereotype that was confirmed to be one of the barriers (Jangren & Jonsson, 2022). As a result, women continue to experience

biases from men. Some of the respondents said: “So I think in some cases there are still biases from males around women’s capabilities”, “Generally from a leadership point of view there’s also a gender bias” Interviewee 1,

“I think first things first sometimes, like I would say women are undermined, we could have the same qualification as a guy, but they will actually not look at that when they are giving opportunities. They will not look at a woman.” Interviewee 6

This is supported by the theory that women have to work harder than men to prove their capability (Jauhar & Lau, 2018).
There is still a feeling that gender stereotypes still exist, and as a result women are not being seen as equals in the workplace. There is still a belief that men perform better than women, but this has not been confirmed true.

Another respondent sai: “I suppose that it could be prejudices and there certainly are, whether that is intentional or not, but there could be preconceptions on why a male would be better than a female.” Interviewee 10

Most of these biases come from history, culture, and tradition. It has been established that because men have always been the ones in the boardroom and managing companies for years, there is an entrenched culture of how things are done and need to be done. The men have boys’ clubs where they go golfing together or have braais on Friday afternoons and even if the woman is not able to join, there are decisions being made over these activities. The men are comfortable with other men because they can just be themselves and enjoy each other’s company. In addition to that there is a history that certain positions are reserved for men and even if women qualify for them, they will not consider a woman but instead hire a man. This is evidenced by the following excerpts: “And I think traditionally businesses used to be boys clubs.” Interviewee 9

“They originate from culture, number one, and this is how we do things here and this is our culture and also from a we can't run away from a history perspective and that for a very long time a boardroom was for men and we've never regarded that the nurturing that the women that

have can make a huge difference in organization and that is the skill that men do not have when it comes to making sure that we have a sustainable development.” Interviewee 2

“I think number one, you know the history of South Africa, of course, that plays a role.” Interviewee 4

“I think it's that just that sometimes it's that history of saying you know certain positions for example, you know you can't have a woman in this position and so forth.” Interviewee 6

In addition to that, it needs to be noted that the corporate space was not made for women and the boardroom was not created with a woman in mind.

“When industrialization happened, and corporates came about they were not created for women. women will never really 100% be at home in the corporate space. the round tables were created for men because at that point women were expected to be at home” according to interviewee 1. According to Mankayi and Cheteni (2022) this biggest challenge stems from the sexual division of labour which expects women to be at home.

“That for a very long time a boardroom was for men” according to interviewee 2

With that in mind, it is imperative that an effort be put into changing the environment that women find themselves uncomfortable in, and that a more accommodating environment be cultivated to allow for women to be in.

### 4.3.2 Enabling women to reach top management

In addressing what HR and senior management can do to enable women to reach top management, and some of interventions that can be implemented to enable women to reach top management the following were suggested.

#### 4.3.2.1 Coaching, Sponsorship, and Mentoring

Seven out of eleven respondents agreed that HR and senior management should introduce coaching and mentoring in the organization to enable women to reach top management. The

women agreed that they benefitted from having a coach and a mentor throughout their careers. And this confirms the sentiments shared by Khwela et al (2020) that mentorships assist with preparing women for top management positions.
The women recounted that they find themselves today in top management because they had sponsors or champions who could speak on their behalf behind closed doors when they were not there.

Participant 2 said “As a woman that I am, I was fortunate enough to have other women believing that for us to able to transform and change, we need to have women around us and I think that's where I'll say I got a sponsor from another woman, whereby I was able to be visible enough based on her guidance and her coaching and for me to be the person that I am.”

The same was shared by Participant 5 “It also helps us, so we need the sponsorships where we're spoken for, in rooms where we are not there, where someone actually like stands up for you and I've been lucky because I've had that”

Participant 3 reiterated the importance of a sponsor by saying “Having a mentor and having someone who would speak for you in your absence” which validated the fact that by having a sponsor it makes it possible for women’s names to be mentioned and considered where they could otherwise be overlooked.

Part of the benefits of having mentors, coaches and sponsors is their ability to “Lower the ladder when you come up and as women, we lower it for each other” according to Participant 4.

It is clear from the responses that mentorship, coaching, and sponsorship play a vital role in getting women ready to accept top management positions. Some of the observations from the study were that the mentoring can come from within or outside the organisation. This will eliminate biases that may exist from within the organisation. Although it was clear from the research that the sponsor needs to be someone from within the organisation because they need to speak on your behalf behind closed doors.

#### 4.3.2.2 Development programs and succession plans

There was an emphasis on having leadership programs that cater to the needs of women specifically.

Participant 1 had this to say "I think one of the key things is actually focusing on you know, female specific leadership programs cause we have leadership programs, we have programs at the business for, but I think personally for me the area that I'm working in is the gap that, to raise the competencies of women in taking up leadership spaces and it has to speak specifically to them, right. So even if you have graduate programs and your leadership development programs but try to have targeted programs for specific groups as well, you know. Because they have challenges males do not have"

Participant 4 said: "I was helped by women in leadership program where I was nominated. It did not make sense at the time, but I understood last year why I had to go into it and why I was there and how it is helping me today". Participant 5 shared that "I think what has helped is leadership programs where you would go for the leadership training as well then that kind of couple you come back with your different mindset".

Participant 6 confirmed the benefits of leadership programs when she said "But I think with the training that I had that the Leadership Development program put me in a position where I felt like I was actually ready"

And according to Participant 5 "You have to identify people that are willing to be managers within the organization and you have to then have programs that enable them to be managers so that you have the right people into the position."

64% of respondents mentioned that having a leadership program and succession plans can be used to enable an upward movement of women into top positions. The leadership programs seem to take different formats and it is clear from the study that the programs need to be curated to assist women wanting to move up the upper echelons. The programs need to cater to the women's needs and help them navigate the space.

#### 4.3.2.3 Introducing scorecards and targets

It was evident in the interviews that just setting targets without linking them to the scorecard or KPI's was an ineffective way to enable women to reach top management. Some of the

respondents indicated that in order for changes to be seen, the targets and quotas set need to be linked to the manager's KPI's and even their incentives, according to some.
Participant 11 said "Getting buy in from the guys and then also following through as management so that talks to KPI's and including diversity as a thing in the KPI's of the people". According to Participant 10 "But if you made it an incentive and you said to me we want 50% of the c-suite to be female and it's 20% of your score card, if you achieve that there's a nice bonus if you achieve that" incentivising the management to enable women into top positions can be a good motivation.

### 4.3.3 Address barriers that prevent women to advance to top management

When asked what their organisations had done to address the barriers that prevent women from advancing to top management, there was a range of activities that the different organisations implemented, from mentorship to development programs and introducing quota system.

#### 4.3.3.1 Succession plans and talent programs

Most of the respondents indicated that in addition to the mentoring and coaching sessions which are discussed above, their organisations used succession plans and the talent program to address the barrier that prevent women from progressing in their careers. This includes having a plan that has clear objectives and goals. This outlines how Participant 7 experienced it in her workplace:
"what they did is each people manager would identify talent in their teams based on set metrics, right. But then annually, twice a year, there would be a discussion. Whereas a line manager, as a senior manager, okay so if you have different levels, the senior managers, these guys would present it once a year but then the senior managers would discuss at senior level who is the talent. So, you put people in the different boxes, and you say these ones are the stars, and then we would differentiate between who I ready to be promoted in the next year, who is ready to be promoted in the next 3 years. Then you build this career progression"

Participant 8 felt that the succession planning could work well with the leadership program as follows: "So where when you get to a certain point and we have the right manager with the right supervisor, whatever it is they send you to a leadership program in the leadership

program you're kind of you, you learn these things, you learn how to be a good leader, how to make decisions and all that, then you're it's almost preparing you, you know and it's almost a way of having a sort of succession planning to say if we have proper succession plans where it clearly stated after this person will then working towards putting a black, a black woman there and that means for that black woman to be ready she must go for the leadership training"

### 4.4 Conclusion

It is clear from the study that there are various ways for organisations to make it possible for women to reach top management levels, but it requires a concerted effort and an intentional behaviour to want to change the environment to allow women. Women also have to work on their self-confidence to allow them to accept those roles confidently and without a reason for the men to doubt their abilities.

## Chapter 5: Summary, recommendations, and conclusion

### 5. Introduction

This section summarizes the findings, recommendations, and conclusion that were identified from the data collected. The research was to find out why there are still fewer women in top management positions in South Africa as well as identifying some interventions that have been implemented to address this concern. There are some limitations which were identified and discussed below.

### 5.1 Summary of the research

The research was aimed to investigate why there are still fewer women in top management positions even though the glass ceiling phenomena has been existence for years. The objective was to find out from those women who are in top management positions, how they managed to break the glass ceiling, what interventions they implored to be able to reach top management, and to address the barriers that prevent women from progressing up the career ladder into the upper echelons and to find out from the men what can be done to enable to reach those positions and also find out what they think might be preventing women from progressing upward.

The objective was to identify what HR and policy makers can do to empower and advance women in top management roles. This was achieved by conducting semi-structured interviews with men and women in top management. The interviews averaged between 45 and 60 minutes. 11 interviews were conducted and consisted of 3 men and 8 women from various industries, following which data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach.

### 5.2 Conclusion of the main findings

The research was to identify interventions that can be implored to enable women to reach top management positions. This paper outlines some of the interventions that have been successful in enabling women to move up the career ladder. Some of these interventions include coaching, mentoring, and sponsorship. Based on the responses, it is clear that not all interventions that their organisations implemented were effective such as the quota system and other development programs. It is clear though that when the organisation is intentional about making the environment conducive for women and put in place programs that are created for women, there is success in transition the women upward.

#### 5.2.1 Lack of women in top management

The first objective was to understand why there are still fewer women in top management positions in South African organisations. The study found that due to historical and cultural factors, there is still biasness towards women which contributes to having less women in those positions. The study also identified that women are the barrier at times with their self-doubt, impostor syndrome and not believing in themselves to be able to assume the top management roles.

#### 5.2.2 What HR and top management can do

The study revealed that there are countless interventions that may be put in place but yet some are ineffective unless the organisation is intentional to address this issue. Some of the most effective interventions that resulted from the study were coaching and mentorship and almost all the female respondents agreed that having a sponsor or a champion in the organisation to represent you behind closed doors, was the most effective.

Another issue that the study revealed was that organisations need to be intentional about this if they are to be successful and not do it as a box ticking exercise. Some of the women expressed that attending those programs did not always assist to remove the barrier because the program did not deliver on its objectives, and this was mainly where the program was not specifically designed for women.

### 5.2.3 Addressing the barriers preventing women to top management

According to the study, mentoring and coaching has been effective in addressing the barriers. Introduction of succession plans and talent programs has also proved to be successful when the plan is visible and transparent to the senior managers in the organisation. It was highlighted as well that these plans are more effective when the selected person is aware that they have been identified as talent for the organisation.

## 5.3 Contributions

This research contributed both theoretically and practically as discussed below.

### 5.3.1 Theoretical contributions

This study confirms the social role theory that explains the problem with gender inequality and where it originated from, while the feminist theory assists in identifying the solution that can be used to address the issues. This study will allow decision makers to make better informed decisions on how to address these barriers and enable more women to access top management positions.

### 5.3.2 Practical contributions

This study to determine why there are fewer women, what interventions can be used to enable women to reach the upper echelons, and addressing the barriers that prevent women from reaching these positions, contributes to the gaps that may have existed. The study allowed the Participants to share their personal experiences and perception and this study as per the constructivist paradigm (Adom et al., 2016) can inform evidence-based interventions that can increase the number of women in top management.

## 5.4 Limitations

This research was limited to a geographical area in Gauteng province. The study was designated to be completed through face-to-face interviews where possible but due to the busy schedules of the participants and restrictions to their available time, some of the interviews were held online using Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

There were also time constraints in collecting the data based on the participants' availability during the festive season. As a result, I had to wait for some of them to come back from the holidays before we could have the interviews.

### 5.4.1 Sample size

It was challenging to get the participants to commit to a date and time for interviews due to their busy schedules and because during the festive season, most were on holiday and unavailable. Nonetheless 11 instead of 15 participants were interviewed. This resulted in having other interviews online instead of face-to-face.

### 5.4.2 Geographical Location

This study was only conducted with respondents from the Gauteng province and may not be applicable to other provinces in South Africa.

## 5.5 Future research

This study did not go in-depth to understand what organisations could do to increase their intention to enable women to reach top management positions.

It is recommended that further research be conducted to identify how organisations can be more intentional about enabling more women to reach the upper echelons in top management. In addition it is recommended that future researches identify what needs to be covered in the leadership programs to make it relevant to enabling women to reach top positions.

### 5.6 Practical implications

Based on the findings from the research, women with potential to be in the c-suite and who so desire, need to have sponsors or champions in the organisation that will advocate for them when they are not available to prove themselves.

HR needs to consider having training sessions where men are taught to unlearn any prior perceptions and stereotypes they might have about women and their leadership in top management positions. This will allow for men to understand where their perceptions were rooted from and how to change that.

In addition to that, it is imperative that top management's bonus be based on their contribution towards women being in top echelons of the organisations. This will give the top managers an opportunity to enable women into top management and assist them to realize their potential while knowing that there is someone who will support them during their transition.

### 5.6 Final reflections

The glass ceiling phenomenon continues to exist in our society despite it being discussed several times. There are many barriers that women must overcome to shatter the glass ceiling. This study allows women to consider the interventions that have been addressed and consider how they will learn to be self-confident and believe that they also deserve a seat at the C-suite table. Most of the women who made it into top positions had to believe in themselves first and then use other interventions to prepare themselves. Coaching and mentoring continue to be the most effective interventions that can enable women to move up the career ladder. Having a sponsor is also vital in the progress of women to top management. This study has allowed new evidence that women can hopefully embrace.

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**Addendum 1: Qualitative interview schedule**

**Topic:** Enablers of advancement of women to top management positions in South Africa

**University of the Witwatersrand – Wits Business School**

The questions below seek to address the glass ceiling phenomena and find ways in which this can be retracted to empower more women to advance to top management in South Africa. You (the participant) need to provide a written consent to indicate that you will voluntarily participate in the interviews. The interviews will be completed at a suitable time, at a scheduled date and place agreed by both parties (interviewer and the participant). Following the interview, the audio recorded conversation will be transcribed. Your consent will be required that this information can be used by the researcher for the intended study. You (the participant) can enquire at any time about the results and findings of the research after the study is completed.

The following research questions will be used during the interview and the interview will be recorded to enable the researcher to transcribe it correctly. All the questions below will be asked in the interview.

**Research questions**

**Section A: Why are there still fewer women in top management in South African organisation?**

**Lack of Women in top management positions**
1. Why are there still fewer women in top management positions in your organisation?
2. Why do you think this is the case?
3. What in your opinion has resulted in this?

**Section B: What can HR and senior management do to enable women to reach top management?**

**Enabling women to reach top management.**
4. What can HR and senior management, as individuals, do to enable women to reach top management?
5. Describe some of the interventions that can be implemented to empower women
6. How effective have interventions been and what will you do to improve these?

**Section C: What has been done in South African organisations to address barriers that prevent women to advance to top management?**

**Address barriers that prevent women to advance to top management.**
7. What has been done by your organisations to address barriers that prevent women to advance to top management?
8. Where do you think these barriers originate from?
9. How do you think these barriers can be overcome?

# Participant consent form

**Title of research project: Enablers of advancement of women to top management positions in South Africa**

**Name of researcher: Emily M. Sehloho**

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

I agree that the research study was explained to me, and I understand what the study is about

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequence

I understand that all the information I provide will be treated confidentially

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from the interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted

I agree to my interview being audio-recorded

I understand that my identity will remain anonymous in the research project (any identifying data will not be used or will be disguised by the researcher)

I understand that I can access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage

Signature of research participant

…… ……
(Signature) (Date)

……
(Name of participant)

Signature of researcher

…… ……
(Signature) (Date)

……
(Name of researcher)