

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Examining the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In many organisations across the world, women are underrepresented in leadership and executive roles in comparison to their male counterparts. Roles that are responsible for driving the strategy, vision and top-level decision making are predominately occupied by men. The general perception in most organisations is that female characteristic traits are more nurturing, compassionate and gentle, while, male characteristic traits tend to be dominating, strong, forceful and assertive which can lead to differences in the way that they lead and operate. Females are or may become mothers which may affect their availability and the demands of the job. These perceived differences and views can influence the decision to promote, develop and support more females into senior leadership roles within organisations. The aim of the study was to examine the challenges women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa experience. A qualitative research study approach was used, and participants were purposefully selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences and their challenges. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 women who were in senior leadership positions (Vice President and Executive roles). Thematic analysis was utilised in the study and the data was categorised according to the themes that emerged from the study. The study identified the personal, cultural and organisational challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions. The study highlighted challenges in hiring practices that did not have equitable representation of female candidates, lack of leadership training and development opportunities, lack of female advocacy by both male and female leaders in the organisation and struggles with having their voices and opinions considered. Cultural expectations of women in South Africa relating to their households, children and family related matters as well as the lack of support from the organisation led to the sacrificing of career advancement and opportunities. The organisation could implement equitable representation in its interview and promotion process, formal mentorship, allyship and female advocacy programmes and flexible work-life policies to address the challenges highlighted and better leverage the talent in its female employees and leaders.

Keywords: gender biases; gender parity; glass ceiling; organisational culture; stereotypes

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ACRONYMS

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
CHRO	Chief Human Resource Officer
COO	Chief Operations Officer
C-suite	Comprises of all executives that run a given organisation
CTO	Chief Technical Officer
DIY	Do-It-Yourself
EI	Emotional Intelligence
EDLC	Every Day Low Cost
EXCO	Executive Committee
FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods
HR	Human Resources
HHP	Hypo High Performance
ISM	Indirect Spend Management
IT	Information Technology
JD	Job Description
JSE	Johannesburg Stock Exchange
KPA	Key Performance Area
MAPS	Marketing All Product Survey
OPs	Operations
PA	Personal Assistant
POPI	Protection of Personal Information
STR	Successor Talent Review
UKZN	University of Kwazulu-Natal
UN	United Nations
VP	Vice President

CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

This study aims to examine the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa. Eagly and Karau (2002) proposed that there is an incongruity of the traditional female gender role and leadership roles, which results in prejudicial reactions towards female leaders through negative bias judgement of their leadership performance and restricts their ability to access leadership roles. Women in South Africa and worldwide still experience challenges to progress into decision-making roles that have power and influence and those that are promoted into senior leadership positions struggle to have their views and ideas heard and respected (Mothapo, Stunke, and Van der Niet, 2024). The gender gap for power and leadership are the major components of the lag in gender equality globally, with women still significantly underrepresented in management positions (Hanna, et al., 2023). Women made up only 28.2% of management positions in the workplace globally in 2023 (UN Women, 2023).

Women in leadership continue to experience multifaceted barriers at work with gender stereotypes, problems with their leader styles and their lack of social networking; in their homes dealing with the imbalance and choice between work, careers and family responsibility, and at an individual level dealing with self-confidence and self-esteem struggles that impacts and affects their ability to advance in their careers and leadership positions (Tabassum and Rafiq, 2023). The inclusion and promotion of more women into leadership and C-suite positions benefits organisations by bringing a diverse view to decision making that enables boards to address business issues effectively and organisations that have higher female representation at a board level exhibit improved financial performance (KPMG, 2023).

This study seeks to better understand the lived experiences of the women in senior leadership within the retail organisation and identify common themes which have been encountered or observed relating to career progression, career development, work-life balance and any other contributing challenges. The study also aimed to identify insights from the women in senior leadership on the support they required to enhance their performance and career progression.

This chapter provides insight into the background, significance and aim of the study as well as the problem statement, research questions, research objectives and the research approach that was adopted for the study.

1.2. Background

The research site that was chosen for this study is an internationally owned fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) retail business. The retail organisation has requested for its name to be kept anonymous in the gatekeeper letter (refer to Appendix 5). It operates with three well established trading banners in South Africa and five well known store formats. It has a wholesale trading banner, hereafter referred to as Banner A, that sells food, electronics, houseware, camping, liquor, general merchandise and appliances. The building and hardware trading banner, hereafter referred to as Banner B, specialises in hardware, building, do-it-yourself (DIY) merchandise, general merchandise and appliances. The retail trading banner, hereafter referred to as Banner C, sells general merchandise, non-perishable groceries, homeware, leisure and business products. All trading banners operate from brick-and-mortar stores (300 stores) located across South Africa and in seven sub-Saharan countries, and all banners have online shopping available in South Africa. The company's purpose is to save its customers money so they can live better.

One study done by Nielsen, shows that out of the approximately eighteen million consumers in South Africa, 71% were reported to be female, with 60% of the females being the primary consumers of households (Nielsen, 2019). Despite the female consumers' influence in the retail industry, the executive committee composition of the retail organisation comprises of eight males and three females (of which one is in an acting capacity). It has a 27% female representation at the executive level. Having more female representation at an executive and senior leadership level may benefit the organisation because female leaders bring a diverse perspective and may be more aware, aligned and able to relate to the shopping needs of its majority customer base that is female.

The representation of women in senior leadership positions within South African retailers remains an issue. Despite legislative efforts and policies, such as the *Employment Equity Act, No. 55 (1998)*, which aims at promoting gender equality, there continues to be significant barriers that women face in ascending to executive roles. This study explores the multifaceted challenges that women encounter, focusing on cultural influences, gender disparity, and the dynamics of leadership and power within the retail sector.

Societal expectations and cultural norms play a significant role in shaping the experiences of women in leadership. In South Africa, patriarchal structures and traditional gender roles often undermine women's capabilities and limit their opportunities for advancement (Barkhuizen, Masakane and Van der Sluis, 2022). Although there has been 30 years of democracy, women

still experience environments that are exclusionary with opportunities and networks that are dominated by males and particularly white males (Mngoma, 2024). Research indicates that stereotypes, societal perceptions, a masculine corporate culture and lack of mentorship are significant barriers to women's career progress (Barkhuizen, Masakane and Van der Sluis, 2022). These cultural factors contribute to a work environment where women must navigate additional challenges compared to their male counterparts.

Gender disparity in leadership positions is evident in the South African retail sector. Women are underrepresented in senior management and executive roles, with 42% of women holding senior management positions and only 39% occupying CEO roles (Grant Thornton, 2024). This disparity is further exacerbated by racial inequalities, where black women are exposed to greater obstacles due to race and gender (Mngoma, 2024). The gender pay gap also persists, with women earning significantly lower than men, this highlights the broader systemic inequalities in the workplace (Barkhuizen, Masakane and Van der Sluis, 2022).

To address the challenges that women in senior leadership positions face requires a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, societal, and organisational barriers that impede their progress. The research study will explore if women in leadership at the retail organisation feel that they are supported in their roles and to explore their lived experiences with having their ideas, views and recommendations respected and valued. The research will study the views of women in executive leadership positions to understand if they have input into the strategy and vision of the organisation. The research will further identify if there are any challenges that women in leadership experience relating to career development and progression, mentorship and work-life balance and how the organisation can support its female leaders to optimise their performance and level of contribution to the strategy of the organisation to improve company-wide performance.

1.3. Problem statement

Racial and gender transformation remains a significant challenge within the South African labour market despite the enactment of the *Employment Equity Act, No. 55 (1998)*, which stipulates the employment equity plans and targets that must be implemented to bring about diversity and inclusion in the workplace. The focus in organisations has been more on racial transformation than gender equality in organisations. Significant gender disparities still exist in the labour market despite the considerable progress that has been made to reduce the gender gaps in education (Statistics South Africa, 2019). Due to legislative requirements many companies have appointed women in leadership positions to ensure that they comply with

regulatory requirements. However, it raises the question of whether there is true transformation within organisations or if women are appointed to demonstrate organisations buy-in to diversity, equity and inclusion to shareholders and regulatory bodies.

More leaders understand that there is potential and innovation that can be unlocked by having a diverse workforce, and most boards have shown progress towards becoming more diversified from a racial and gender perspective, but this does not necessarily mean that they are inclusive (Carey, Martel, and Zottis, 2020). While organisations measure and track diversity and even linked it to incentive targets of boards, they are unable to do the same to measure inclusion (Romansky, et al., 2021). Inclusion in the workplace is defined as a work environment where all employees feel accepted, respected, valued and supported and they are participating in decision-making and are afforded development opportunities within the organisation (Romansky, et al., 2021). In the South African economically active population, 48% is comprised of women and they held approximately 35% of board positions but only 25% of women were in executive roles in the Top 40 organisations (Statistics South Africa, 2022). This demonstrates that while women have better representation in board positions there is a lack of support towards the career advancement of women employees in C-Suite roles (Justshare, 2023).

The retail industry is a fast-paced, predominately male-dominated environment. On the JSE's Top 40 listed retail companies, women represent only 34% of board seats and 20% of executive roles (Justshare, 2023). Although women comprise half the workforce, they remain over-represented in lower-level positions, with most senior leadership positions occupied by males who are paid higher salaries than their under-represented female counterparts (Hanleybrown, Hawkins and Medrano, 2019). Women in senior leadership positions often encounter resistance and bias, both overt and subtle that can undermine their authority and effectiveness (Naong and Naong, 2023).

According to PWC's Executive Directors report for 2023, of the JSE's top 200 listed companies only 15.6% (67) of the CEOs and CFOs were women as compared to men (PWC, 2023). The report further revealed that of the JSE's top 200 listed companies the white race group dominated the CEO (81%), CFO (74%) and Executive Director (58%) positions. The findings of the report indicate that most companies on the JSE have not adopted/embraced gender/equity parity and gender/equity transformation (PWC, 2023).

CHRO South Africa, a professional human resources body conducted a study on women in business in South Africa and found that 55% of women in leadership had little to no confidence

to address challenging issues over fear that it may hinder their career growth and affect job opportunities (CHRO, 2019). Some challenges South African women face in the workplace include fear of speaking up and voicing their opinions, having trouble having tough conversations on their salary negotiations and fear of harassment and discrimination (CHRO, 2019).

While women may have been given a seat at the boardroom table, it has not always resulted in women being given an equal opportunity to have a say in the strategy and vision of organisations. Addressing the challenges faced by women in senior leadership positions requires a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, societal, and organisational barriers that impede their progress. This research seeks to understand the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership in a retail organisation and provide insights for fostering a more inclusive and equitable workplace in the South African retail sector. The research could be beneficial to retail organisations to support, develop, grow and give women an opportunity to add value and contribute to the vision and strategy of the organisation.

1.4. Significance of study

The motivation for the study was driven by the researcher's own career and leadership aspirations and personal experience from working within the researched retail organisation and in other similar institutions. Although women make up the majority of the consumer base of retailers, this is not reflective in the senior leadership representation of the retail organisation, which reduces the benefit that the retail organisation could receive from the valuable insights, experience and empathy that women in senior leadership can bring because they identify with current and prospective customers. Women in senior leadership may feel frustrated, underutilised and undervalued if their views and opinions are not considered, which can stifle growth and innovation. The study can assist the retail organisation to better understand the challenges that women in senior leadership experience and identify opportunities to address the issues raised and allow the organisation to better leverage their female leader's talent and skills.

1.5. Aim of the study

The study aims to examine the challenges women in senior leadership positions experience in a retail organisation and the benefits that the retail organisation can derive by enabling and empowering more women in senior leadership positions in South Africa.

1.6. Research questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

- What challenges do women in senior leadership experience in executing their roles and responsibilities in a retail organisation in South Africa?
- How can the women in senior leadership positions receive more support to enhance their performance and career development in a retail organisation in South Africa?
- How can the retail organisation in South Africa benefit from having more women in senior leadership positions?

1.7. Research objectives of the study

The study objectives were:

- To identify the challenges that women in senior leadership experience in executing their roles and responsibilities in a retail organisation in South Africa.
- To examine the support measures that women in senior leadership require from a retail organisation in South Africa to enhance their performance and career development.
- To provide recommendations to the retail organisation in South Africa on the benefits of having more women in senior leadership positions and how the retail organisation can mitigate the challenges identified in the study.

1.8. Limitations of the study

The limitations of the study were that the sample population is comprised of women leaders only and not men, and there was only a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews conducted. This was done to identify the lived experience of the women in senior leadership positions.

1.9. Research approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted for the study to assist in examining and understanding the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions. Qualitative research seeks to ascertain the meanings or behaviours that groups of people or individuals may experience through certain human or social problems and the reasons that govern such behaviour (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research is the collection and analysing of non-numerical data such as text

or video to understand experiences, opinions and concepts. The basis for selecting this research approach is to understand the lived experiences of women in leadership positions and the challenges they have experienced and to get their perspective of the recommended changes or initiatives that can be proposed to the retail organisation. The benefits of using the qualitative research method in this study was that it enabled the gathering of more in-depth information by asking open-ended questions during the interview process versus a quantitative approach of utilising a survey.

1.10. Sampling strategy

Participants for this study were selected based on their knowledge, seniority and their current roles within the retail organisation. This purposive sampling technique ensures that the participants have relevant experience and insights into the challenges faced by women in senior leadership positions. Purposive sampling is effective when the researcher needs to focus on specific characteristics of a population that is of interest (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016).

Data was collected through 13 semi-structured interviews, which was recorded and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes within the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This approach allowed for a rich, detailed and complex account of data.

1.11. Ethical considerations

The study was aligned to the ethical guidelines proposed by the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Ethical clearance approval was obtained prior to the research being conducted. A gatekeeper letter was obtained from the researched retail organisation and informed consent forms were obtained from all participants denoting their consent to participate in the research study. All interviews were kept confidential, and the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they were able to opt out of the study at any time.

1.12. Structure of the dissertation

This study is divided into six chapters as listed and summarised below:

Chapter One: Introduction to the research study

This chapter provides an overview of the research study and comprises of the background of the study, the research aims and objectives, elaborates on the significance of the study and provides an overview of the research methodology that was applied in the study.

Chapter Two: Literature review

This chapter provides an overview of the main terms related to the research study. It comprises of secondary data that has been critically reviewed and analysed on the challenges female leaders' experience, the support they require and the benefits the organisation can derive.

Chapter Three: Research methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology adopted for the study. It discusses the justification for selecting the methodology, the research paradigms, the approach and application of the research methodology, data collection and analysis.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter presents the findings and key themes derived from data obtained during the interviews that were conducted.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter discusses the results that were analysed and interpreted from chapter four.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter summarises the key findings and themes of the research from the interviews that were conducted and the literature review. It provides a critical analysis of similarities and conflicting views. It also provides recommendations and suggestions for future research that can be carried out.

1.13. Chapter summary

Although there have been improvements and progress in advancing women into senior leadership roles over the years, it has been a slow transition. Despite laws and regulations being enforced to promote and enforce diversity, equity and inclusion, women in senior leadership still experience challenges and barriers in exercising their power and influence in decision making and strategy. The retail industry is largely driven by female consumers and

by creating a culture of diversity, equity and inclusivity, the researched retail organisation could leverage the diverse and innovative ideas and recommendations of its women leaders to give it a competitive advantage in the retail industry. The next chapter, Chapter 2, will provide insights into the literature review supporting the research study on the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The aim of this research study was to examine the challenges that women in senior leadership positions experience in a retail organisation in South Africa. Literature review searches were conducted to better understand the challenges that women in senior leadership experienced that impacted on their career progress, development and advancement within their chosen occupational fields as well as their personal lives. This chapter provides an overview of the key findings of the literature review search. There are many academic works that have been written about the challenges that women in senior leadership experience across multiple industries, cultures and countries which is indicative of a systemic cultural and organisational problem. These challenges may inhibit and prevent women from progressing in their occupational fields to be effective in leadership and progress up the corporate ladder. During the literature review search that was conducted, there was no academic literature and research that could be found in recent years to understand the specific challenges that women in the retail industry experienced. This chapter will describe the dynamics of the retail industry, the impact that organisational culture and leadership has on gender equality, gender parity, gender bias and the importance of diversity, inclusion and equity in leadership. It will also explore the challenges and barriers that women in senior leadership experience from a personal, organisational and cultural perspective.

2.2. Defining leadership

Yule (2006) describes leadership as the ability or the process of influencing others through collective or individual efforts towards a common goal or shared objectives. Kotter describes leadership as a process of moving an organisation or group towards a vision or goal through change and innovation (Bencivenga, 2002), while Maxwell defines leadership as having influence, and nothing more or less (Maxwell, 2010). Leadership is about influence. The success of any organisation is dependent on the leader's ability to positively or negatively influence its followers towards working towards achieving a shared vision, goal or objective. The key elements of leadership as illustrated in Figure 2-1, involve influencing others, being intentional about bringing about significant change, taking and driving personal responsibility and integrity, creating change, having a shared purpose, having followers but also knowing how to follow (Daft, 2008).



Figure 2-1: What leadership involves

Source: (Daft, 2008, p.5)

In the ever changing, fast paced retail industry leaders need to be willing to change, they must embrace and promote diversity and transformation to positively influence the organisation to be effective and successful. The tone and behaviours within an organisation are defined by the organisation's leadership and how they practice their beliefs and values. If leadership promotes gender equality, gender inclusion and embraces diversity then that behaviour will cascade through the organisation, the reverse is also true. If the organisation observes that its leadership does not actively promote gender equality and inclusion, then it will treat these matters with the same level of importance in the organisation.

2.2.1. Effective leadership

Effective leadership is an important factor in the success and growth of organisations. It is the practice of guiding, inspiring, and influencing others towards achieving common goals. It involves creating a vision, motivating employees, and fostering an environment that encourages growth, development and productivity (Barnes et al., 2024). By contrast, ineffective leadership can cost organisations by fostering poor employee morale resulting in decreased productivity, loss of innovation, less profitability and a decrease in turnover (Landry, 2018). The benefits of having effective leadership in an organisation is the improvement in employee retention and productivity because employees feel valued, customer satisfaction is improved because employees will positively engage and serve customers and increased employee motivation will result in improved productivity and innovation because employees are aligned to the vision and goals of the organisation (Landry, 2018). The characteristic of an effective leader is that they have the ability to influence, are transparent within reason to build trust, encourage risk taking and innovation, act decisively, demonstrate resilience, are accountable and demonstrate integrity (Landry, 2018). The effectiveness and impact a leader has, is largely influenced and dependant on the leadership style that they adopt.

2.2.2. The impact of leadership styles

Leadership styles play a crucial role in shaping the culture, performance, and overall success of an organisation. There are various leadership styles that can influence organisational culture and gender diversity. The transformational, transactional, autocratic and democratic leadership styles will be discussed looking at its unique characteristics and effects on the dynamics of the organisation because these styles are more prevalent in retail organisations:

- i. Transformational leadership: Focuses on inspiring and motivating employees to foster innovation and achieve their full potential. Transformational leaders are known for their visionary thinking, continuous feedback, and their support for personal development (Korejan and Shahbazi, 2016). Research by Garzón-Lasso et al. (2024) highlights the positive impact of transformational leadership on employee satisfaction, extra effort, and effectiveness.
- ii. Transactional leadership: Is an approach based on a system of rewards and punishments to manage employees. Transactional leaders focus on achieving specific goals and maintaining routine operations (Garzón-Lasso, et al., 2024). While effective in certain contexts, this style may not foster long-term employee engagement or innovation and may be less conducive to gender equality.
- iii. Autocratic leadership: These leaders make decisions independently without consulting their team members. This top-down approach can lead to quick decision-making but may also result in low employee morale and high turnover rates (Boogaard, 2024).
- iv. Democratic leadership: These leaders value the input of their team members and make decisions based on collective agreement. This participative approach can enhance team cohesion and employee satisfaction but may slow down decision-making processes (Boogaard, 2024).

The type of leadership style that is adopted by a leader determines their effectiveness and will affect the rate of success or outcome that they receive. Women in leadership require a transformational leadership approach from their leaders and women leaders need to adopt a transformational leadership approach to be able to change patriarchal organisational cultures to be able to cope and develop.

2.2.3. Male and female leadership styles

Research has consistently shown that there are notable differences between male and female leadership styles. Male leaders are often described as task-oriented, authoritative, and decisive (Mashele and Alagidede, 2022; Rizvi, 2024). They tend to focus on achieving specific goals, making quick decisions, and maintaining control over their teams. In contrast, female leaders are often characterized as relationship-oriented, collaborative, and empathetic (Mashele and Alagidede, 2022; Rizvi, 2024). Women emphasize building strong interpersonal relationships, creating a supportive work environment and fostering teamwork.

In organisations the terms 'male leadership' and 'female leadership' styles are often used to describe the styles that are generally exhibited by each gender type; however, females can exhibit the characteristic traits that are associated with 'males' and vice versa (Rizvi, 2024). This is because leadership styles are mostly influenced by personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, personality and the environments that leaders are exposed too. The term prescriptive gender stereotyping occurs when there is an expectation or restriction that is placed on a specific gender type based on traditional gender expectations or roles of the gender type (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023).

Due to prescriptive gender stereotypes a woman who takes on a leadership role and is assertive maybe negatively evaluated because she is perceived to be less warm, less empathetic and likeable than a woman that displays the traditional feminine trait, which could lead to her receiving discriminatory treatment by not having her contributions recognised and even being passed over for career progression and promotion. Similarly, women leaders that display traditional feminine traits maybe seen as an 'weaker' or less competent than male leaders and may have their voices not heard or passed over. This has led to many women leaders feeling conflicted that they have to change or adapt their leadership styles to be more man-like or masculine to compete and survive in their work environments (Barkhuizen, Masakane and Van der Sluis, 2022). Male and female leaders have character traits that can complement each other and create value and advantages to organisations if effectively leveraged and dependent on the environmental context that the organisation is in (Babalola, du Plessis and Babalola, 2021).

2.3. The retail industry

The retail industry is a vital sector of the South African economy, encompassing a wide range of businesses involved in selling products and services to consumers. The retail industry in

South Africa is the second largest employer after the government (Teuteberg, 2021). It is characterised by its fast-paced, highly competitive and customer-centric nature. The South African retail landscape is increasingly described as a "red ocean environment", where intense competition and saturated markets necessitates continuous innovation and differentiation to survive and thrive (Kumar, 2023). According to the marketing research foundation, MAPS, 58% of women are responsible for the day-to-day purchases of South African households (Bizcommunity, 2023). However, women are not equitably represented at senior levels and key decision-making positions in retail organisations. The retail industry in South Africa is largely dominated by white males at the executive and board level positions with males representing 66% of board seats and 80% of executive roles on the JSE's Top 40 listed retail companies (Justshare, 2023).

2.4. The importance of organisational culture

Organisational culture, as defined by Schein (1985), is a system of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that shape the behaviour of individuals and groups within an organisation. It influences various aspects of organisational life, including decision-making, communication, and employee engagement. In South African history, women have largely been marginalised, treated inferior to men and have often had to endure harassment and abuse, to the extent that the government has had to launch campaigns against gender-based violence and enact legislation such as the Employment Equity Act, No. 55 (1998) to promote equitable treatment of women within the workplace. Despite these initiatives women remain underrepresented in the corporate sector. The impact of organisational culture on women's progression in senior leadership roles is a complex one. Studies by Hofstede (2011) suggest that cultural dimensions such as individualism, masculinity, and power distance can influence gender roles and opportunities within organisations. Organisational culture can significantly influence the growth and progression of women in leadership roles. Organisation culture can have a negative impact on an organisation's effectiveness by creating barriers (Robbins, 2009). These barriers include:

- i. **Barrier to change:** This is when the current culture of the organisation promotes values that is not in line with those that are required and necessary for the organisation to succeed (Robbins, 2009).
- ii. **Barrier to diversity:** This is when the organisation recruits diverse employees to harness the benefits of diversity, but then negates the achievement of the benefit of diversity by putting pressure on employees to conform (Robbins, 2009).

- iii. Barrier to mergers and acquisition: Mergers and acquisitions can benefit the organisation from a product and financial synergy, however cultural incompatibility can be a powerful force that undermines the success of the merger and acquisition (Robbins, 2009).

Although organisations may recruit diverse employees if they don't support and foster a culture of inclusiveness and diversity, they will not be able to realise the benefits of having diverse ideas, views and opinions. Similarly, if organisations want to bring about change and gender equality then it must become a shared lived value across the organisation.

2.5. Historical and generational culture challenges

Culture is a combination of the beliefs, traditions, customs, dress, behaviours and attitudes of people which varies across the different societies (Nehemia and Lenkoe, 2023). South Africa consists of diverse race groups with varying cultural beliefs and customs concerning the roles and responsibilities of women in society. Although there has been improvement in the way that women are treated in many South African cultures, progress has been slow. In the African culture, males have dominance and determine the way women conduct their family and private responsibilities (Nehemia and Lenkoe, 2023). At the beginning of the twentieth century women's positions in both black traditional African societies and white settler societies were seen as inferior and subordinate to men; the men made the major decisions in society and home with women's primary responsibility being that of motherhood and taking care of the home (South African History Online, 2018). These beliefs systems may have diluted over the years, but it still has an impact of the perception that men have of women both in society and organisations which creates unknown biases, in the manner which women are perceived and treated.

Historically, women in South Africa have faced significant barriers to leadership roles due to systemic gender discrimination and patriarchal norms. The legacy of apartheid has further exacerbated these challenges, creating a socio-economic environment where women, particularly black women, have had limited access to quality education and resources. This has resulted in a lack of representation of women in senior leadership positions within the retail sector (Mngoma, 2024). Research by Jali, Suknunan, and Bhana (2021) highlights the patriarchal society that still dominates South Africa, where women are underrepresented in leadership positions.

Gender role expectations play a big influence in organisations with 48% of men and 70% of women in agreement that society has an expectation on how women's behaviours can hinder them from becoming senior leaders (Zhao, 2020). In majority of households when there are any family responsibility matters, the cultural expectation is that the women must take time off from work to address the matter because men have careers that require their attention, in order to navigate this expectation, a lot of women either opt to be stay at home or they take a less-demanding job to be more available in the home (Zhao, 2020). This leads to career growth restrictions.

2.6. Gender bias, gender stereotyping, sexism, gender parity and equality

Gender bias, gender stereotyping, sexism, gender parity and equality are pervasive issues that affect women's advancement into senior leadership roles across various industries, including retail.

2.6.1. Gender bias and gender stereotyping

Gender bias is a cognitive distortion that leads to unequal treatment based on gender stereotypes, that can hinder women's progress in leadership roles. Women leaders often have their competence and authority undermined due to biases and stereotypes that they encounter, and women leaders are seen to be less decisive and too emotional in comparison to their male counterparts (Khanam and Ishrat, 2024). Gender bias manifests in various forms, such as hiring practices, promotion opportunities, and workplace culture. In the context of senior leadership, gender bias often results in fewer women occupying top positions. Gender bias can be categorised into first-generation and second-generation gender bias. First-generation gender bias is a conscious bias, which is the intentional unfair treatment or discrimination against women which is created by organisations and society which can manifest itself in the form of limiting promotional opportunities and salaries, whereas second-generation bias is an unconscious bias that is often outside of the person's awareness and can arise from cultural belief systems, it is not intentional bias but can manifest in how females are supervised and where they should be positioned in the workplace structure (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023).

Gender stereotyping involves assigning roles, traits, and behaviours to individuals based on their gender. These stereotypes can limit women's career aspirations and opportunities for advancement. The 'glass elevator' is referred to as a hidden phenomenon where men benefit from quickly advancing to higher positions in organisations, even in organisations that are

dominated by women (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023). Women in contrast must overcome gender stereotypes and gender bias to breakthrough glass ceilings and the intentional disadvantages imposed on them by males in the workplace to progress and advance in their careers by convincing men that they are competent and capable (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023). Ryan and Haslam (2005) found that often in times of organisational crisis and downturns, women leaders were able to 'break through' the glass ceiling and be appointed into C-suite positions and boards. But this often resulted in their performance being scrutinised and them being harshly judged due to the performance of organisations who were already poorly performing. Women leaders were often blamed for the poor performance and organisational failure and experienced humiliation. This practice is termed the glass cliff. Women when appointed into senior leadership positions are often placed in support role positions like marketing, human resources that are not performance and commercially critical, however studies have found that in times of poor performance many organisations are more likely to give women opportunities in positions that drive the financial performance of the organisation, which can lead to their failure and tarnishing their reputation should the company perform poorly (Ryan and Haslam, 2005).

2.6.2. Sexism, gender parity and equality

Sexism, gender parity, and equality are critical concepts that intersect in discussions about women's leadership in the workplace, particularly in sectors such as retail. Understanding the nuanced relationships between these concepts is vital in comprehending the challenges that women in senior leadership positions in retail organisations face, particularly in the South African context. Sexism, a form of discrimination based on gender, that can create barriers for women in the workplace, where there is a belief that one gender is superior to another (Nel and Govender, 2023). It can manifest in various ways, hostile work environments, limited opportunities for advancement and unequal pay. Sexism is generally thought to be behaviours that men portray towards women however some women who believe they are superior to other women can also exhibit sexism behaviours that deliberately create barriers and restrict other women from being promoted and advancing in their careers (Achhnani and Gupta, 2022). This type of behaviour by women in leadership, towards other women leaders and their subordinates is closely associated to the queen bee syndrome and will be discussed in more detail later.

Gender parity and gender equality are often used interchangeably, but they represent distinct concepts. Gender parity refers to the equal numeric representation of men and women in all aspects of society, including the workplace and leadership positions (World Economic Forum,

2024). Gender equality, on the other hand, goes beyond equal representation and involves ensuring that men and women have equal rights, opportunities, and responsibilities. It involves addressing systemic barriers and biases that hinder women's advancement and empowerment (UN Women, 2023). While gender parity is a necessary first step, it is not sufficient for achieving true gender equality. A workplace can achieve gender parity but still perpetuate gender inequality if women face discrimination, harassment, or limited opportunities for career progression. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index provides a comprehensive assessment of gender disparities across various countries. The index measures gender gaps in four key areas: political empowerment, economic participation and opportunity, health and survival, and educational attainment. The 2024 report highlights the persistent gender gap globally, with significant variations across regions. While some countries have made substantial progress in closing the gap, others continue to lag behind. South Africa has shown improvement in recent years, but it still faces significant challenges in achieving gender parity and equality, particularly in leadership roles (World Economic Forum, 2024).

According to the Women in the Workplace 2024 Report by McKinsey (2024), while there has been improvement in women representation in corporate organisations, this has not resulted in parity. Women have a higher presentation at entry level and manager positions in organisations, but this differs at a vice president, president and C-suite levels, with only 29% of women holding C-suite positions as can be seen in Figure 2-2. Most vice-presidents, presidents and C-suite roles are occupied by white males, with women of colour hold fewer leadership positions and only representing 7% of C-suite positions (McKinsey, 2024). Men significantly outnumber women at a manager level in corporates therefore organisations find it difficult to support the sustained progress of women at more senior levels in the occasion because they were not deliberate about creating an equitable pipeline which perpetuates the gender parity and gender equality issue.

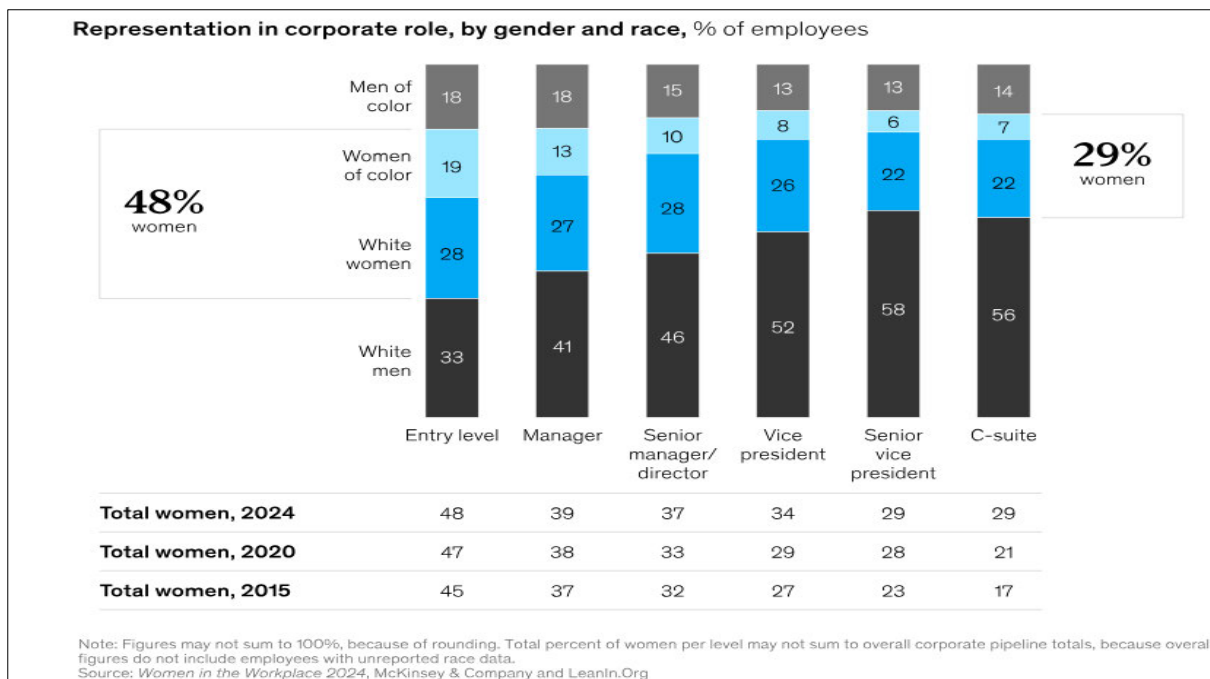


Figure 2-2: Gender representation in corporate roles

Source: (McKinsey, 2024)

The lack of gender parity and equality has profound implications for women in leadership roles, some of which include the following impacts (Jansen and Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023; McKinsey, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2024):

- i. **Career progression:** Women often encounter systemic barriers and biases that hinder their career advancement. These barriers can manifest in various forms, such as unconscious bias, lack of mentorship and sponsorship, and limited access to high-profile roles.
- ii. **Development opportunities:** Women may have fewer opportunities for professional development, training, and skills-building. This can limit their ability to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to advance in their careers.
- iii. **Mental health:** The challenges associated with gender inequality can negatively impact women's mental health. Issues such as stress, burnout, and discrimination can take a toll on their well-being.
- iv. **Role expectations:** Women in leadership roles often face heightened expectations and scrutiny. In comparison to their male counterparts, they may be held to higher

standards and are more likely to be perceived as assertive or aggressive when they exhibit leadership qualities.

Gender parity and gender equality are essential for creating inclusive and equitable workplaces. While significant progress has been made in recent years, there is still much work to be done to address the challenges faced by women in leadership roles. By understanding the distinctions between these concepts and their implications, organisations can take steps to promote gender equality and empower women to reach their full potential.

2.7. Tokenism

Tokenism is the practice of promoting or placing people from disadvantaged groups, such as women, disabled and minority ethnic groups, into distinguished or senior roles in the organisation to create the impression or perception that the organisation supports and practices equal opportunity (Kanter, 1993). Tokenism is defined as the practice of hiring or promoting a small number of people from underrepresented groups to prevent criticism and create an illusion of equality (Sherrer, 2018). Due to legislative efforts and policies, such as the Employment Equity Act, No. 55 (1998) many organisations have been forced to structure themselves and their employee representation to be compliant with legislation however without the culture of the organisation changing certain positions and appointments may be construed as tokenism. Tokenism can have several negative impacts on organisations. It can lead to a lack of genuine diversity and inclusion, as token hires are often not given the same opportunities for growth and development as their counterparts. This can result in a superficial approach to diversity, where the organisation fails to address deeper systemic issues (Moraka, 2024).

Tokenism can significantly hinder the career progression of women leaders. Women in token positions often face heightened visibility, which can lead to increased scrutiny and pressure. This can result in a lack of credibility and support from colleagues, making it difficult for women to advance in their careers. Additionally, token women may experience isolation and a lack of mentorship opportunities, further impeding their career growth (Zimmer, 1988). Zimmer (1988) highlights the limitations of tokenism in explaining the experiences of women in male-dominated occupations and suggests that tokenism can hinder women's progress by diverting attention from the underlying issues of sexism in the workplace. Tokenism is a significant barrier to the advancement of women in senior leadership roles. Addressing tokenism requires a genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion, with a focus on creating an environment where all employees have equal opportunities for growth and development.

2.8. Queen bee syndrome

The concept of the queen bee syndrome is based on the queen bee in a honeycomb/hive, who does not tolerate other queens and sees them as a threat to her and will take any action necessary to maintain her authority and importance in the hive (Achhnani and Gupta, 2022). The queen bee syndrome refers to where women have had to endure and overcome challenges to obtain leadership positions and become pressurised to maintain their positions and self-worth by exhibiting masculine characteristics such as assertiveness or being competitive and distancing themselves from other senior or junior women leaders (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023). As women ascend in organisations, they develop gender-based assumptions and judgements of other women's dedication to their careers and jobs and are less supportive or don't advocate for equal opportunity programs. Women leaders who are queen bees maintain their dominance over other female employees and female leaders by being overly critical of them, constantly highlighting mistakes, assigning a different level of work to them, embarrassing them in meetings, ignoring them and gossiping about them to undermine them (Achhnani and Gupta, 2022). Having a greater number of women in senior leadership should initiate change by lowering organisational bias, reducing selection and structural inequalities, mentoring and fostering a safe environment for other women leaders to be self-confident and to progress and advance in their careers, however women leaderships that demonstrate queen bee syndrome can have the opposite effect. Women leaders that have queen bee syndrome have gender-stereotypical beliefs that are less likely to be seen as sexism and their actions are not seen as gender discrimination yet by their actions and behaviours, they can limit the career opportunities of their female subordinates (Achhnani and Gupta, 2022; Mufti, Moazzam and Basit, 2021). Queen bees can cause other women leaders to doubt themselves, be afraid to voice their opinions and ideas for fear of retaliation, become frustrated, adjust their leadership style to be more masculine or turn down career advancement roles.

2.9. Allyship and gender advocacy

Allyship is a concept gaining significant traction in recent years and represents a powerful tool for fostering inclusivity and empowering marginalised groups. Advocacy is a term often associated with social justice and human rights, it is a strategic process that involves speaking out on behalf of individuals or groups publicly to promote their interests and rights (Anigbogu, 2009).

2.9.1. Allyship

Many organisations have relegated diversity, equity and inclusion to the human resources department and don't actively promote it in their respective spheres. Most C-suite and senior leadership positions are held by white males who avoid having conversations on racism and gender equity because it's a controversial and uncomfortable conversation and would rather insist and promote that their organisations are colour and gender blind than admit white male privilege (Melaku et al., 2020). Allyship, in its essence, is the active and conscious practice of using one's privilege to support and advocate for marginalised groups (Warren, 2020). It involves recognizing and acknowledging systemic inequalities, challenging oppressive systems, and taking tangible actions to promote justice and equity. In the context of women's leadership, gender allyship entails men and women in positions of power using their influence to amplify women's voices, challenge gender biases, and create inclusive work environments (Kossek et al., 2024).

Several organisations have demonstrated the power of allyship in promoting women's leadership. For instance, Johnson & Johnson has implemented a comprehensive allyship program that encourages employees to become active advocates for gender equality (Knepp, 2021). The program provides training, resources, and opportunities for employees to engage in allyship activities. Similarly, Microsoft has launched initiatives to foster allyship among its employees, including mentorship programs, unconscious bias training, and employee resource groups (Ray, 2020). The challenge with implementing an allyship program is that advantaged groups are hesitant to participate due to the misconception that their efforts may be seen as inauthentic and they underestimate the impact that their support will have on the marginalised and disadvantaged (Kossek et al., 2024). The benefit of allyship to women in senior leadership is:

- i. Increased visibility and recognition: Allyship can elevate women's profiles, making them more visible within the organisation and increasing their chances of being considered for leadership roles (Knepp, 2021).
- ii. Enhanced career progression: By advocating for women's advancement, allies can create opportunities for women to climb the corporate ladder and achieve their career aspirations (McKinsey, 2024).
- iii. Improved development opportunities: Allies can support women's professional development by mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring them, providing access to valuable resources and networks (Johnson and Smith, 2018).

- iv. Enhanced mental health and well-being: Allyship can create a more supportive and inclusive work environment, reducing stress, anxiety, and burnout among women leaders (Kutlaca and Radke, 2022).

Allyship is an important component of creating a truly inclusive and equitable workplace. By understanding the theoretical underpinnings of allyship and its practical applications, organisations can empower women leaders to reach their full potential. By implementing allyship programs, providing training, and encouraging employee engagement, organisations can foster a culture of support, collaboration, and advancement for women.

2.9.2. Gender advocacy

Advocacy is a term often associated with social justice and human rights, it is a strategic process that involves speaking out on behalf of individuals or groups publicly to promote their interests and rights (Anigbogu, 2009). Gender advocacy, as defined by Cats-Baril (2022), is a proactive effort to promote gender equality and challenge gender-based discrimination. It involves raising awareness, advocating for policy changes, and supporting initiatives that empower women and girls. This definition underscores the multi-faceted nature of gender advocacy, which encompasses a broad range of activities, from grassroots activism to high-level policymaking. In organisations both men and women can advocate for gender equality by challenging harmful stereotypes and promoting a more equitable society. Gender advocacy can empower women leaders to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Advocating for flexible work arrangements, equal pay, and opportunities for leadership development, women can redefine their roles and responsibilities within the organisation. Gender advocacy can create a more level playing field for women, enabling them to advance to senior leadership positions (World Economic Forum, 2024). By addressing biases and discrimination, organisations can ensure that women have equal opportunities for promotion and career growth.

2.10. Work-life balance and family responsibility

Another significant obstacle that women in senior leadership encounter, is juggling the responsibilities of family obligations, their personal life and work commitments. Women in senior leadership struggle to find balance between their personal and professional lives because they must fulfil their roles as a mother, wife, caregiver and their household and domestic responsibilities (Barkhuizen, Masakane and Van der Sluis, 2022). These roles come with distinct expectations and responsibilities. As mothers, women are expected to provide

care, nurture, and support their children. As wives, they may be expected to maintain household responsibilities. And as leaders, they are expected to excel in their professional roles, often demanding long hours and significant dedication. This confluence of roles can lead to significant stress and strain, impacting both personal and professional lives (Barkhuizen, Masakane and Van der Sluis, 2022).

Societal expectations continue to shape gender roles, often reinforcing traditional stereotypes. Women are still frequently perceived as primary caregivers, responsible for domestic duties and childcare. These expectations can make it difficult for women to balance their work and family commitments, particularly in demanding leadership roles (Naqbi, 2023). Organisational cultures can also contribute to work-life balance challenges. Long working hours, inflexible work arrangements, and a lack of supportive policies can exacerbate the difficulties faced by women in senior leadership (Nsibande, 2023). Moreover, gender biases and stereotypes can hinder women's career progression and limit their opportunities for advancement (Naqbi, 2023). Addressing the challenges of work-life balance for women in senior leadership requires a multifaceted approach. Organisations must implement supportive policies, such as flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and childcare subsidies (Hanleybrown, Hawkins and Medrano, 2019). Societal attitudes and expectations must also evolve to recognize the contributions of women in both professional and personal spheres. By fostering a culture of gender equality and work-life balance, organisations can empower women leaders to reach their full potential.

2.11. Self-confidence and self-esteem challenges

The ascension of women to senior leadership positions in South Africa has been a significant milestone in the fight for gender equality. However, even as women break through the proverbial glass ceiling, they continue to face a myriad of challenges, including those stemming from self-confidence and self-esteem. Confidence is one of the key elements that women in senior leadership must have and what sets them apart from other women and men in the organisation because they need to be able to make major decisions to progress, grow and move the organisation forward by providing constructive input and direction (Baumeister et al., 2003). A lack of these qualities can hinder their ability to navigate complex organisational environments, negotiate effectively, and inspire their teams.

Apart from the external challenges that women in leadership experience, they also have to navigate their own internal challenges where their lack of self-confidence and self-esteem creates barriers or roadblocks for their career advancement and development. Most women

create self-limitations on themselves, instead of promoting themselves and their abilities, they back-down and feel that they are not ready to progress into senior and executive positions. Compared to men, women tend to have more self-limiting thoughts (Zhao, 2020). Imposter syndrome is a psychological phenomenon where a person doubts their achievements and abilities, despite evidence to the contrary (Clance and Imes, 1978). Women in leadership positions often experience imposter syndrome, leading to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. This can manifest as a fear of failure, self-criticism and perfectionism, and a tendency to attribute successes to external factors rather than internal abilities when speaking of their accomplishments (Zhao, 2020).

Stereotype threat occurs when people are aware of the existence of negative stereotypes in their group but fear confirming those stereotypes (Carr and Steel, 2009). For women in leadership, this can lead to increased anxiety, self-doubt, and decreased performance. Gender bias and discrimination can undermine women's self-confidence by reinforcing negative stereotypes and limiting their opportunities for advancement. Microaggressions, such as sexist comments or exclusion from important meetings, can erode women's self-esteem and make them question their abilities (Carr and Steel, 2009). Low self-confidence and self-esteem can have significant negative impacts on women's careers and overall well-being causing them to avoid seeking out development opportunities or shy away from taking on stretch assignments due to fear of failure. It may hinder women's ability to seek promotions, negotiate for raises, and take on challenging assignments. Women may also struggle to assert themselves, make decisive decisions, and effectively lead their teams. By understanding the root causes of these challenges and implementing effective strategies, women can overcome these obstacles and fully realize their potential (Mashele and Alagidede, 2022). Organisations also have a crucial role to play in fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment that empowers women to thrive.

2.12. Mentorship and development

Organisations need leaders that are agile and resilient and can draw from a range of competencies to be able to balance the goals and strategy of the organisation as well as support its employees to function optimally and maintain a sense of personal well-being. To be able to lead change and drive performance in an organisation, leaders need to be to have emotional competencies, such as empathy, resilience, emotional intelligence and emotion regulation (Wang, Wilhite and Martino, 2016). Mentorship is relationship between a more experienced individual (the mentor) and a less experienced individual (the protégé). Mentors

provide guidance, advice, and support to their protégés, helping them to navigate their careers and achieve their goals (Bertrand, Stader and Copeland, 2018).

Sponsorship is a more strategic form of support, involving advocacy and promotion. Sponsors actively champion their protégés, advocating for them in decision-making processes and recommending them for leadership opportunities (Charlton, 2023). Research suggests that women in senior leadership positions often lack access to effective mentorship and sponsorship. This can have significant implications for their career progression and development opportunities (Charlton, 2023). Without strong mentors and sponsors, women may struggle to navigate organisational politics, build influential networks, and secure high-profile assignments (Bertrand, Stader and Copeland, 2018). Organisations can implement formal mentorship and sponsorship programs that match women with experienced leaders to address this challenge. Additionally, leadership programs can be designed to develop and equip women with the skills and knowledge needed to build strong relationships with mentors and sponsors.

Self-awareness training helps individuals to understand their strengths, weaknesses, values, and motivations. This type of training can be particularly beneficial for women in leadership positions, as it can help them to develop a strong sense of self and to build their confidence (Prummer et al., 2024). Emotional intelligence (EI) training focuses on the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions. EI is essential for effective leadership, as it enables individuals to build strong relationships, resolve conflicts, and make sound decisions (Prummer et al., 2024). Research shows that women in leadership positions may benefit from targeted training and development opportunities, including self-awareness and EI training. Without such training, women may struggle to effectively manage their emotions, communicate effectively, and build strong relationships with colleagues and subordinates (Wang, Wilhite and Martino, 2016).

Lack of mentorship, sponsorship, training, and development can have a significant impact on women leaders' roles, career progression, development opportunities, work-life balance, mental, and emotional health. For example, women who lack strong mentors and sponsors may be overlooked for promotions, excluded from important decision-making processes, and denied access to high-profile assignments. This can lead to feelings of frustration, isolation, and burnout. Additionally, women who lack self-awareness and EI skills may struggle to manage their emotions, communicate effectively, and build strong relationships with colleagues and subordinates. This can negatively impact their job performance, career progression, and overall job satisfaction.

2.13. Summary

To summarise, this chapter discussed the retail industry and its characteristics, the influence that culture has on an organisation, how historical and generational cultures and experiences can affect employees' behaviours and beliefs in an organisation. It examines what effective leadership looks like and how leadership styles differ in male and female leaders and the impact of the different leadership styles. The chapter also discussed the challenges that women in senior leadership experience across industries and organisations with gender bias, gender stereotyping, tokenism, gender parity and gender inequality. The chapter highlighted the role that women leaders have in creating a challenging environment and barriers for other women leaders and their sub-ordinates. It looked at the impact of work-life balance and family responsibility and its effect on women in leadership. It discussed how personal insecurities and self-confidence struggles can create internal limitations and barriers for women leaders. It highlighted the importance of allyship, advocacy, mentorship and development to navigate the challenges and promote gender equality and gender parity in organisations.

The next chapter discusses the research methodology of the study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology that was used in this research study to examine the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa. A qualitative research analysis approach was adopted due to its ability to delve into the complex and nuanced experiences of the participants and to provide insights into the barriers and challenges they have encountered.

3.2. Research paradigm

A research paradigm underpins the overall approach to knowledge generation. It is a fundamental set of beliefs and assumptions that guide how researchers approach a particular field of study (Yong, Husain and Kamarudin, 2021). It shapes the way researchers view the world, what they consider legitimate knowledge, and the methods they use to collect, analyse and interpret data. Different paradigms have different underlying philosophies about the nature of reality, the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the purpose of research. According to Candy (1989), a leader in the research field, the vast number of paradigms that have been proposed by many researchers can be grouped into three key taxonomies, namely positivist, critical and interpretivist.

The positivist paradigm is based on the natural science model of inquiry. It assumes that there is an objective reality that exists independently of the researcher. Positivists believe that knowledge can be gained using scientific methods, such as experiments and surveys, which allow researchers to test hypotheses and generate generalizable findings (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Interpretivism is based on the idea that reality is subjective and socially constructed. Interpretivists believe that knowledge is gained through understanding the meanings that people attach to their experiences. Qualitative research methods are used, such as interviews and observations, to collect data and to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of research participants (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Critical theory is a form of social inquiry that focuses on power, inequality, and social change. Critical theorists believe that research should not simply describe the world but should also challenge the status quo and work towards a more just and equitable society. They use a variety of methods, including qualitative and quantitative methods, to collect data and to analyse the ways in which power relations shape people's experiences (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017).

This study employs an interpretivist paradigm, acknowledging the subjective nature of the human experience (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The aim of the study was to understand the lived experiences of women in senior leadership positions at a retail organisation in South Africa, focusing on how women in leadership interpret and navigate challenges within the organisation. This paradigm is suitable for exploring the nuanced challenges experienced by women in senior leadership roles, as it allows for a deep exploration of personal experience and perceptions.

3.3. Research design and methods

Research design is the approach and strategy that was utilised to collect data as it pertains to the research aims, objectives and research questions. A qualitative research design was chosen for this study because it is a robust method of inquiry that allows for the exploration and understanding of human behaviour, experiences and social phenomena (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This research is inherently exploratory in nature. While some research exists on women in leadership, the specific context of women in senior leadership in retail in South Africa requires further investigation. The research does not begin with pre-conceived hypotheses to be tested. Instead, it employs open-ended questions and flexible data collection methods to allow participants to share their experiences freely and openly to explore new insights that may emerge during the data collection. Qualitative research differs to quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research delves into non-numerical data such as text, audio, and video to gain deeper insights into a research subjects experiences (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). According to Bhandari (2024), qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of non-numerical data to understand the research participants opinions, experiences and understanding. Qualitative research can be more subjective based on any personal bias, perspectives and expertise of the researcher, how the data is analysed, interpreted and then findings and conclusions derived (Damaskinidis, 2017).

An interpretivist research approach was selected because the study aims to understand the lived experiences, challenges and views of women in senior leadership positions, and this can be achieved through interviews with the participants of the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who were purposefully selected based on their position in the organisation and the researcher's knowledge of and relationship with them. A semi-structured interview approach provides the ability to be interactive and sensitive to the words and concepts of the interviewees while allowing flexibility in the interview process to ensure that key themes were covered (Benlahcene and Ramdani, 2021).

3.3.1. Study setting

The research study was conducted in a retail organisation that operates within South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa and is wholly owned by an international retail company. The organisation's identity has been kept anonymous as per agreement with the organisation and due to ethical considerations. The organisation is a fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) retail business with three trading banners. The wholesale trading banner (Banner A) retails in the wholesale sale of food, groceries, electronics, houseware, camping, liquor and general appliances. The building retail banner (Banner B) specialises in hardware, building and do-it-yourself (DIY) as well as general merchandise products. The retail banner (Banner C) sells general merchandise, non-perishable groceries, homeware, leisure, outdoor products. All trading banners operate from approximately 300 brick-and-mortar stores that are located across South Africa and in seven Sub-Saharan countries, with its biggest presence in South Africa. All trading banners have online shopping platforms in South Africa. The organisations head office operates in Gauteng with Regional Offices situated in Kwazulu-Natal, Western-Cape and Gauteng. There are approximately 7141 employees (also referred to as associates) in the management category which includes skilled employees, professional management, senior management and top management comprising of 3597 females and 3544 males. However, at the senior and top management categories there are 170 employees (associates) with a female composition of 61 and 109 males.

3.3.2. Population and sampling method

The research study was based on examining the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa; therefore, a purposeful sampling technique was utilised. A purposeful or judgemental sampling technique identifies and selects a sample based on the professional judgement, knowledge or expertise of the population's parameters (Paton, 2002). The use of purposeful sampling allows for a better match of the sample with the objectives and aims of the study to improve the trustworthiness and quality of the data and the results (Campbell et al., 2020). The participants selected to be part of the research study was due the leadership positions that they held in the organisation, their knowledge of the organisation and their knowledge of any leadership challenges that may have existed in the retail organisation as well as their willingness and availability to participate. The total population size was 57 women in leadership and consisted of 20 vice-presidents (this role is more senior than the executive role in the organisation but is below the senior vice-president role and the chief executive office role in seniority) and 37 executives (this role is a level below the vice-present level) in the organisation. The sample selection consisted of 8 female vice-

presidents and 8 female executives being 16 senior female leaders in total. The female leaders were from across 6 functional departments across the retail organisation namely Finance, Legal, Merchandise, Information Technology, Supply Chain and Store Operations, refer to Table 3-1. The study reached saturation by the thirteenth interview when all insights, themes and critical issues were exhausted, with no new and emerging themes being derived based on the population being relatively homogenous and the research objectives being defined (Hennik and Kaiser, 2022).

Table 3-1: List of participants

Participants	Leadership Position	Department
P1	Executive	Head Office Legal Real - Estate
P2	Vice-President	Head Office Finance - Transactional Reporting
P3	Vice-President	Head Office Finance - Procurement
P4	Executive	Banner A - Merchandise
P5	Vice-President	Banner B - Store Operations
P6	Executive	Banner B - Financial Reporting
P7	Vice- President	Head Office Legal - ECommerce
P8	Vice-President	Head Office Supply Chain
P9	Executive	Banner B - Merchandise
P10	Executive	Banner C - Financial Reporting
P11	Executive	Head Office Finance - Payroll
P12	Executive	Head Office Information Technology- Banner C
P13	Executive	Head Office Information Technology- Banner B

3.3.3. Construction of the data collection instrument

An interview guide was prepared for the study (see Appendix 2). The first 8 questions were mostly focused on demographic questions related to: ethnicity, age, position at the institution, qualification level, years of service at the organisation, years of service in a leadership position and parental status. The remaining 16 questions explored the potential challenges that women in senior leadership positions encountered within the retail organisation. The interview guide was administered to the thirteen participants who were selected because of their leadership position and knowledge of the retail organisation. Probing questions were asked by the researcher to gather more information about certain issues raised during the interview to

determine if there were any additional themes and codes that should be considered. Probing during an interview process helps to elicit deep, enriched and insightful detailed data from participants (Robinson, 2023). The probing questions were not included in the interview questionnaire but were asked as was needed to gain more clarity or gather more information during the interview.

3.3.4. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected participants during August and September 2024 to collect data. The interviews were based on a series of questions in the interview guide to support the research aim but was open-ended to encourage conversation and the elaboration of information. The interviews were held using Microsoft Teams video conferencing platform and took place remotely because most participants are based across the retail organisations head office and regional offices. Written consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted, and the participants' identities were kept anonymous and confidential to alleviate concerns of possible retaliation and victimisation.

Permission was obtained from participants to record the sessions that were conducted on Microsoft Teams to enable the transcribing of the data collected during the interview. The interview questions consisted of demographic-related questions and specific questions related to the research aim and objectives. Questions that could reveal the identity of the participant was avoided. The interviews were approximately 45-60 minutes in duration. Qualitative documents such as official transformation reports, minutes of meetings and other documentation were also requested in the research process.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis is an important element of data collection because it enables the researcher to derive meaning from the data obtained during the research. Thematic analysis is a useful tool in qualitative research to identify, analyse and interpret themes from the data that has been collected (Christou, 2022). Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data in this research study using the 6-phase coding framework by Braun and Clark (2006). The 6 phases are:

1. Collection and familiarisation of the data from the semi-structured interviews
2. Generating codes from the collected data
3. Identification and grouping of the data into potential themes
4. Reviewing the themes from the data
5. Naming and defining the themes based on the significance to the research study

6. Concluding and reporting on the findings that were derived from the thematic data analysis

NVivo software was used to analyse, organise, and code the interview transcripts and assist with the thematic analysis. This was done with the assistance of word clouds, tree maps, cluster analysis and hierarchy charts as illustrated in Figure 4-1, 4-2, 4-3 and 4-4 in Chapter Four.

3.5. Trustworthiness, credibility, bias control and transferability

Trustworthiness is important in qualitative analysis in ensuring the reliability and credibility of the findings of the research. To develop credibility, the researcher must engage with participants over an extended period, practice reflexivity and use triangulation (Ahmed, 2023). Prolonged engagement is when rapport and trust is built with the participants over a period of time that allows the researcher to get insights into the participants experiences, beliefs and behaviours. The researcher has worked in the researched retail organisation and has a knowledge of the women in senior leadership from interaction and engagement with them in the ordinary course of business. Reflexivity is when the researcher is aware of her own bias and maintains an objective stance when collecting analysing and interpreting the data (Ahmed, 2023). It is important to be aware of any contribution that the researcher maybe making which could distort the findings. The researcher was aware to ask the semi-structured interview questions and only ask probing questions to gain clarity or additional insights and did not share her own views or opinions with the participants so that there was no distortion that could influence their responses. The use of transformation reports, management structure related information from the retail organisation's website and interviewing across different senior levels and functional departments aimed to reduce bias. Transferability is the degree to which the findings from the research can be extrapolated to other situations or alternate contexts (Kakar et al., 2023). Transferability can be achieved when the research study is of a high quality, which was done by providing a detailed literature review in chapter two on the challenges that women in senior leadership experience and by providing a comprehensive and clear methodology on the research approach and the sampling process.

3.6. Delimitations

Delimitations are the choices made by the researcher to narrow the scope of the study. These choices are intentional and are made to focus the research on specific areas of interest so that the study remains manageable and focused (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The first delimitation of the study is that it was directed to only women in senior leader positions that

held the role of vice-president and executive as they were perceived to have the most knowledge, insight and lived experience related to the research topic. By concentrating on this particular group, the study aims to provide a detailed understanding of the unique challenges and experiences faced by women in these positions. The second delimitation was the research was confined to a single retail organisation in South Africa. This specific focus allows for an in-depth exploration of the challenges faced by women in senior leadership roles within this particular context. The third delimitation was the research is geographically limited to South Africa. This restriction ensures that the findings are directly applicable to the South African context, considering the unique socio-cultural and economic factors that influence women's experiences in leadership roles.

3.7. Limitations

Limitations are shortcomings or weaknesses in the research design that may influence the conclusions and the outcomes of the research. There is an obligation on the researcher to disclose the limitations that are present in research study to provide context so that findings are not minimised or overemphasised and to support future research and investigations (Ross and Zaidi, 2019). The first limitation in the study was that it focused solely on one retail organisation within the retail sector in South Africa, the findings may not be applicable to women in senior leadership roles in other retail organisations, sectors or countries. The cultural context of South Africa may influence the experiences and challenges faced by women in senior leadership roles, these findings may not be directly transferable to other cultural contexts, limiting the study's applicability to other regions. The second limitation was that it focused solely on experiences of women in senior leadership positions which could affect the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of women in leadership roles in the retail sector.

3.8. Ethical considerations

Before conducting the research, approval was obtained from the retail organisation's gatekeeper to proceed with the research topic within the organisation, and consideration was given to special requests from the retail organisation around exclusions (See Appendix 5). Permission/Ethical Clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Ethics Committee before conducting interviews (See Appendix 4). The participants selected for the research were presented with consent forms to sign, giving their consent that they are willingly participating and consent for the interviews to be recorded (see Appendix 1). Participants were advised that they could withdraw from the research at any time. Participants' identities and

responses were kept anonymous. Data was collected from participants in the form of semi-structured interviews that were held on the Microsoft Teams platform.

3.9. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the research approach and design, the rationale for the selection of the sample, the process for collecting, analysing and interpreting the data from the research study. It also provided an overview of how credibility, trust and bias control would be managed and the ethical considerations that were undertaken to examine the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa.

The chapter that follows will present the results of the study.

4.2.2. Tree map

Tree maps reflect the data (the most frequently used words) in relation to the size of blocks.

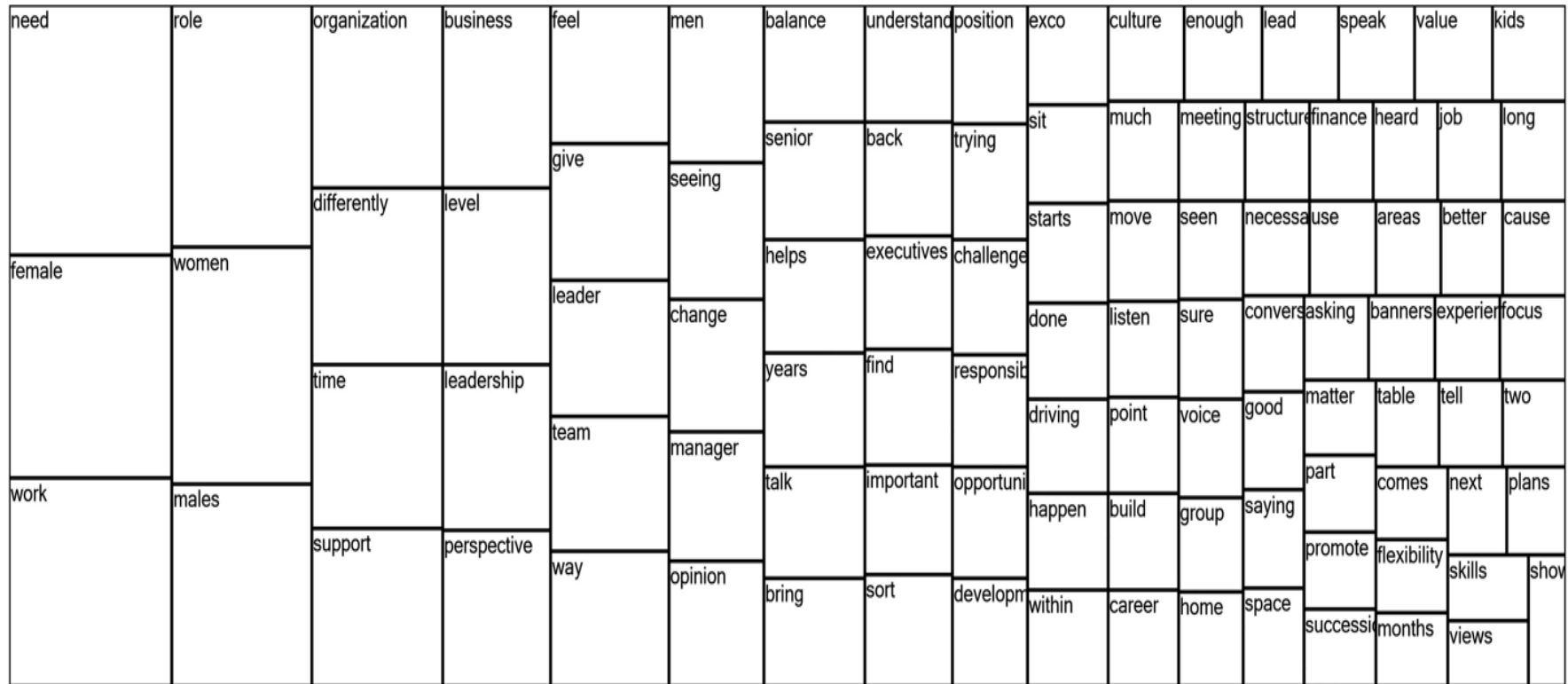


Figure 4-2: Tree map of words

The larger blocks reflect those words mostly used by participants. The map in its entirety, provides a holistic view of how data is placed in terms of size of reference. Figure 4-2 illustrates that participants used the words need, female, work, the most. This is indicative of the areas that mostly

The larger the bubble, the higher the frequency of words/references by all participants. The closeness of the bubbles shows that there was a relationship between those words. Figure 4-3 shows the relationships between some words like women, needs, organisation, roles, leader and level. The male and female bubbles and the work, home, time bubbles also seem to dominate in terms of word frequency.

4.2.4. Hierarchy chart

Hierarchy charts reflect the size of the nodes. The larger the size the more volume/concentration of participants’ responses in that area.

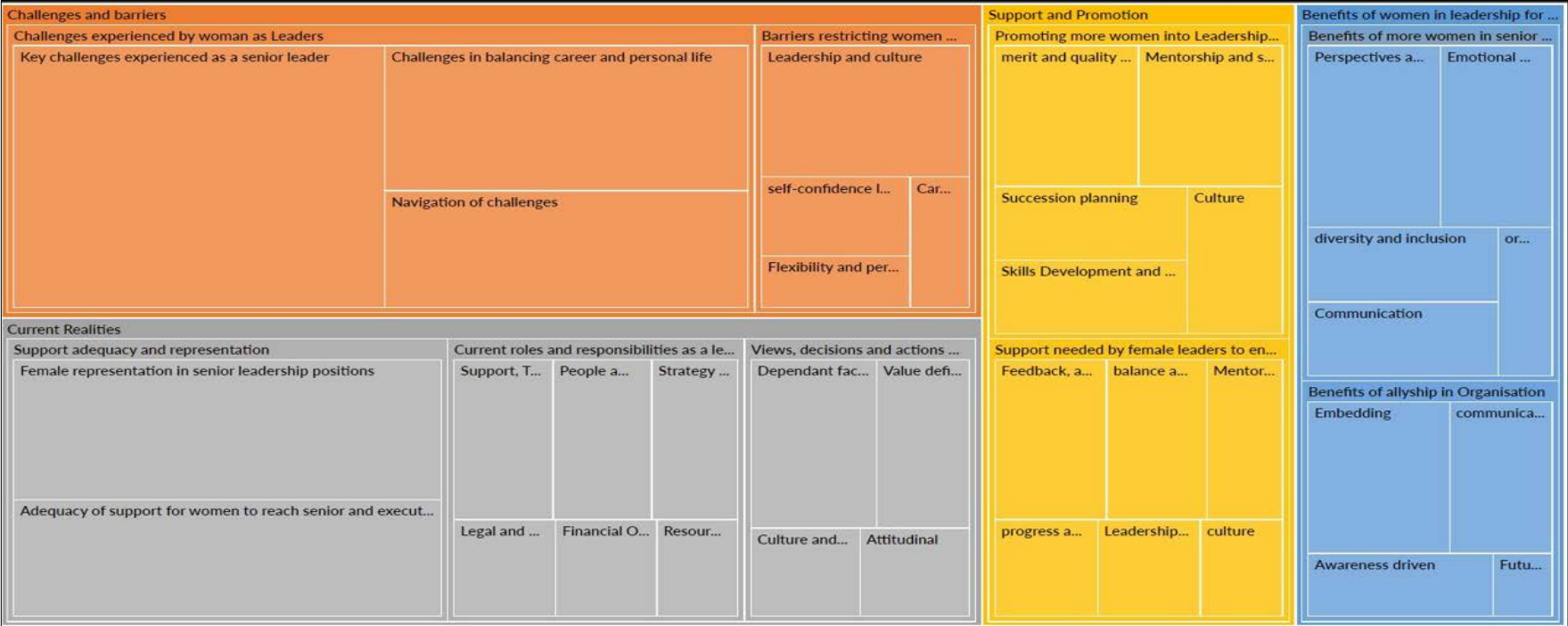


Figure 4-4: Hierarchy chart of words

Figure 4-4 shows some of the key themes based on the concentration of responses were on challenges and barriers, current realities, support and promotion, and the benefits of women in leadership.

4.3. Demographics of the participants

4.3.1. Race/ethnic group

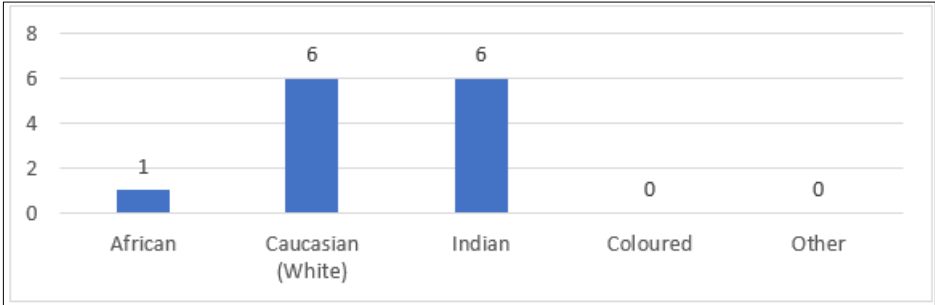


Figure 4-5: Race/ethnic group of participants

As reflected in Figure 4-5, the participants that consented to participate in the study were mostly from the White and Indian race groups. There was only one African respondent who consented to participate out of five that were invited. There were no explanations provided by invited participants for their non-participation.

4.3.2. Age group

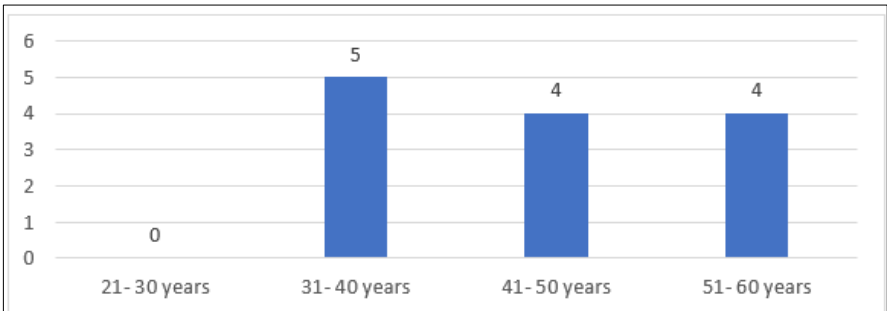


Figure 4-6: Age group of participants

Figure 4-6 shows that of the thirteen participants, eight were over the age of forty indicating establishment within their career and experience.

4.3.3. Highest qualification

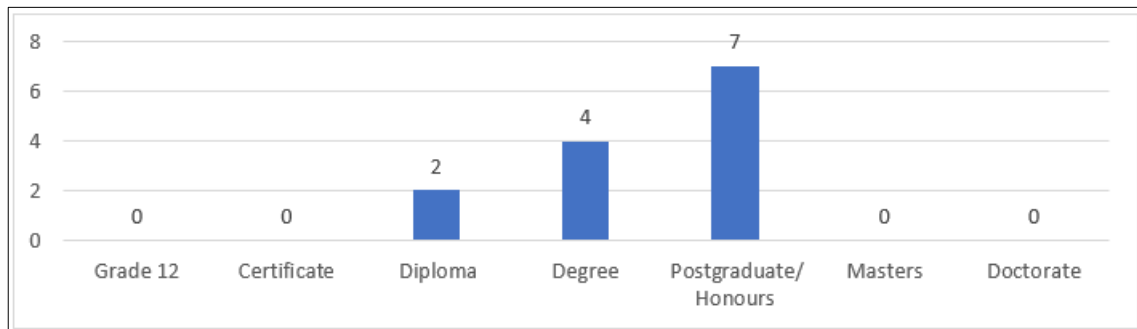


Figure 4-7: Highest qualification of participants

As can be seen from Figure 4-7, of the thirteen participants, 11 participants had a minimum of a degree qualification, with a considerable number having postgraduate qualifications. This indicated high levels of education and expertise of the participants.

4.3.4. Position of participants

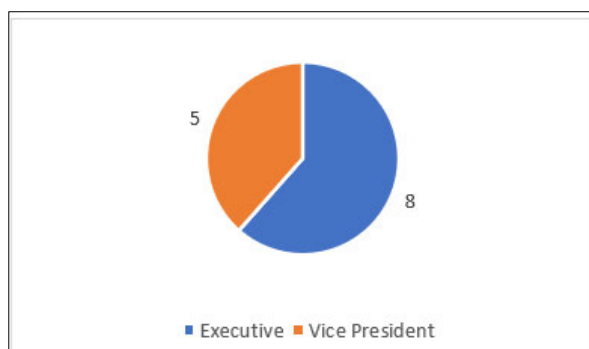


Figure 4-8: Position of participants in the organisation

Figure 4-8 shows that majority of the participants in the research study occupied Executive positions in the organisations.

4.3.5. Length of service within the organisation

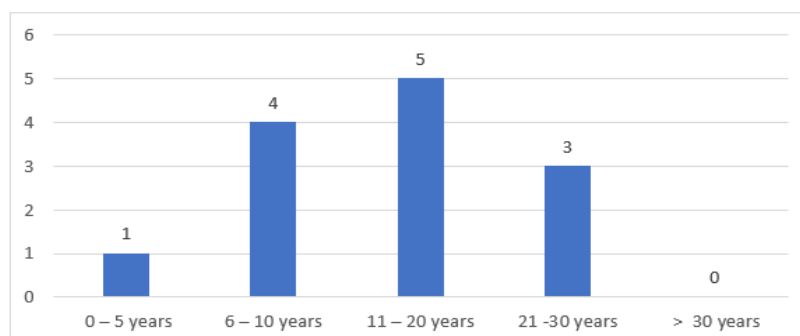


Figure 4-9: Length of service within the organisation

Figure 4-9 shows that majority of the participants in the research study had an experience of eleven years and over in the organisation thereby indicating commitment and experience within the organisation.

4.3.6. Length of time in current leadership in organisation

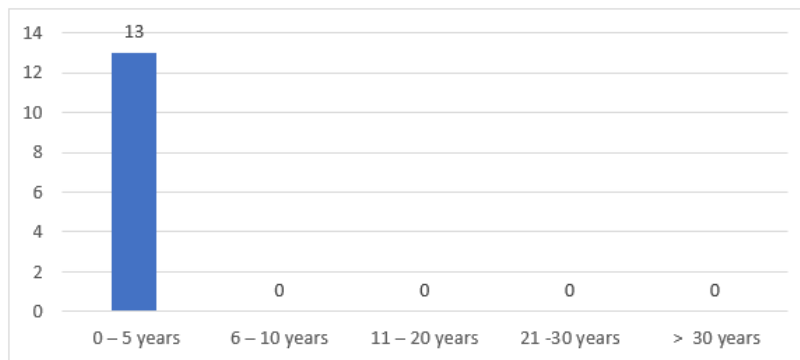


Figure 4-10: Length of time in current leadership position

As shown in Figure 4-10, all participants were in their current roles for less than five years, indicating recent transition into their roles.

4.3.7. Previous leadership positions



Figure 4-11: Status of previous leadership positions

All participants had previous leadership roles as reflected in Figure 4-11, thereby indicating growth and consistency in their positions within the organisation.

4.3.8. Have children that require care and supervision outside work

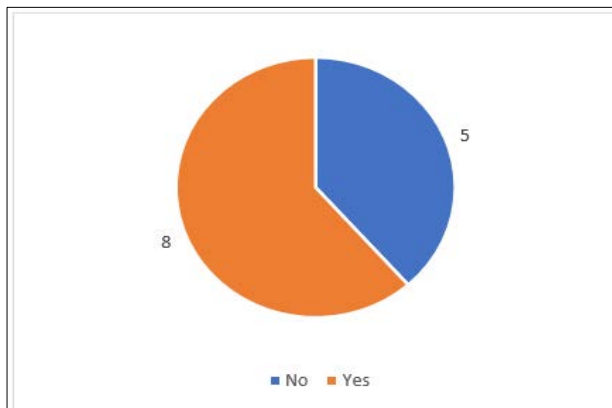


Figure 4-12: Have children that require care and supervision

Majority of the participants in the research study have children that require supervision and care outside of work, which can be seen in Figure 4-12.

4.4. Themes of the study

A theme reflects a common recurring pattern in the data collected that is clustered around a central concept and describes the different dimensions of that single concept (Braun et al., 2019). A sub-theme exists under the theme and shares the same central concept but focuses on a specific and notable element (Braun et al., 2019).

Table 4-1: Themes and sub themes

Themes		Sub-themes	
Theme 1	Current Realities	Sub-theme 1	Current roles and responsibilities as a leader
		Sub- theme 2	Support adequacy and representation
		Sub- theme 3	Views, decisions and actions received by others in the organisation
Theme 2	Challenges and Barriers	Sub- theme 1	Barriers restricting women into senior leadership positions
		Sub- theme 2	Challenges experienced by women as leaders
		Sub- theme 3	Challenges in balancing career and personal life
		Sub- theme 4	Navigation of challenges

Themes		Sub-themes	
Theme 3	Support and Promotion	Sub- theme 1	Support needed by female leaders to enhance performance and career development
		Sub- theme 2	Promoting more women into Leadership positions
Theme 4	Benefits of Women in Leadership for the Organisation	Sub-Theme 1	Benefits of more women in senior leadership positions
		Sub-Theme 2	Benefits of allyship in organisations

A summary of the themes and sub-themes of the thematic analysis is reflected in Table 4.1 above and will be discussed further.

4.4.1. Main theme 1: Current realities

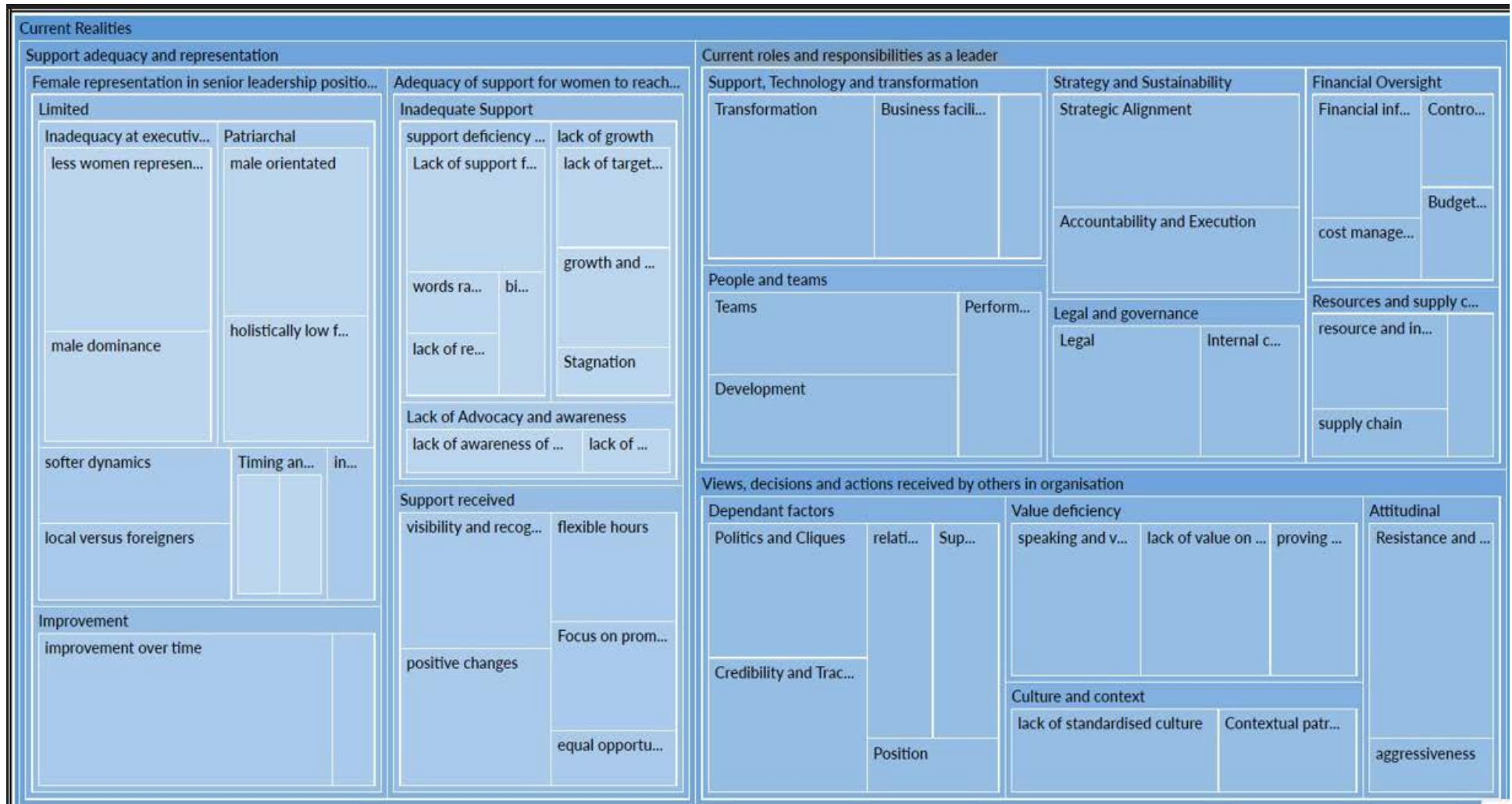


Figure 4-13: Hierarchy chart of current realities

This primary theme examined the current realities of the respective participants in leadership roles based on the hierarchy chart in Figure 4-13. This included their current roles and responsibilities as a leader, support adequacy and representation as well as how their views and decisions are received. Please note that wherever quotations appear in this chapter, they are included to lend support to the conclusions.

4.4.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Current roles and responsibilities as a leader

The current role of the female participants was informed by their leadership responsibilities to develop, performance manage and lead their teams, to inform and execute on the strategy of the organisation.

- **People and teams**

Participants indicated that they were responsible for people development and managing personnel growth, which also entailed addressing development requirements, succession planning, and supporting employees' aspirations for future roles within the organisation.

“So, I have people management components in my structure. I'm responsible for personnel development. So, there's a whole leadership perspective around people development and structures.” [P12]

“In terms of the development requirements and in terms of their succession and aspirations to develop into future roles in the organisation.” [P9]

Participants noted that their performance aspects entailed personnel delivery and job completion by supporting and enabling the team to achieve objectives aligned with the broader business goal.

“Personnel delivery as well as ensuring that you know the job gets done, if you want to call it that.” [P12]

“It means I need to ensure the team is supported and enabled to help us achieve our objectives, which tie into the business's objectives, for example payroll.” [P3]

- **Strategy, sustainability and financial oversight**

Some participants indicated that strategy and sustainability, accountability and execution as well as business facilitation and support were a core function of their leadership roles. Strategic leadership and alignment with organisational objectives were emphasised, whilst also focusing on sustainability within the team and structure. The extracts from the interview transcripts show

that their responsibilities included managing and delivering on strategic intent, and guiding teams towards business goals.

“From an executive perspective, it's then stepping into the realms of strategic alignment of this department to the overall objectives of the organisation, ensuring sustainability, in the team and the structure I'm overseeing.” [P11]

“My role is essentially to help strategically lead the team and the business towards achieving the business goals right.” [P3]

The participants noted that business facilitation and support entailed gathering and interpreting information to empower the business and partnering with teams to achieve objectives. The goal was to support the business in becoming the leading retailer in the country. In addition, they indicated that there was a focus on connecting various stakeholders to ensure alignment and effective collaboration.

“As well as facilitating and finalising sales and acquisitions of properties within the space.” [P1]

“I like to say that we gather/get information, we interpret, we help empower the business and then we help work with them. Go on a journey to understand where they need to be. Questioned it, be a gatekeeper, partner with them.” [P3]

Participants expressed that as with any leadership position, financial oversight remains a crucial component. The participants were responsible for budgeting and forecasting performance as well as cost management across the organisation. The primary focus was ensuring strong financial performance. Hence their responsibilities included forecasting, setting annual budgets, sales, stock spending, planning, and cash flow management.

“My team is responsible for managing the working capital for food, liquor and general merchandise across Banner A. That requires to set the annual budgets, engage in the monthly forecasting of where we project, sales and margin. Where we plan to spend on stock and how stockholding is forecasted to be throughout the year so that we can give updates to finance and to treasury and to manage cash flow and also to feedback to the international organisation's head office on where we gauge our financial performance to be running, but my primary responsibility is actually to lead my team and provide them with stability, focus and direction.” [P4]

4.4.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Support adequacy and representation

This primary sub-theme outlined the views of the participants about the representation of females at senior levels as well as the support received in their current roles.

- **Female representation in senior leadership positions**

Female representation in senior leadership positions was seen mainly as limited by participants. Few participants did see an improvement, whilst majority felt there was less representation of female leaders. The organisation still seemed to be patriarchal in nature, this was informed by the participants views that are reflected in the extracts from the interview transcripts. Participants noted that although there has been progress, particularly among finance leaders, concerns remain about adequate representation across different levels and functions, with participants perceptions of imbalance, especially in areas like operations and marketing.

“There’s very few female representations in terms of operations, you know, there’s a handful, I mean Participant 5 being a great inspiration and lead from that perspective.” [P11]

“Well, if you look at most areas within the group, we don’t really have a 50/50 representation...” [P2]

“At a VP level, hard to say if we have the right balance, but in the meetings that I sit in for finance, you can see a little bit of 50/50 in OPS not necessarily in marketing. Yeah, I’m inclined to say almost say no without knowing the stats. It doesn’t feel like we have enough representation at all the levels.” [P3]

The participants expressed the view that there is a need for more equitable representation, particularly at the executive level, where there are only few women compared to a larger number of male leaders. Participants noted that the leadership within the organisation remain predominantly male-dominated, with a bias against promoting female candidates.

“I think the successors still tend to be male orientated. I think from a statistical perspective, yes, we do know we meant to look for demographics and equal representation when we bring talent from outside. But I’m going to say you almost know the characters of some of the aged men in our EXCO. That the chances of them bringing a female is minimum to none.” [P11]

“I’ll say recently, yes there is, but is not at the more equitable point. We still have a lot of male leaders in the business, especially like even if you look at Exco days, there are about 2 females out of more than six or something like males.” [P6]

The participants were of the opinion that there was an imbalance across the different trading banners, with some banners showing strong efforts to support women in leadership while others were less committed, especially in relation to the holding company’s boardroom representation.

“Definitely quiet an imbalance as well across the banners. So, what I notice is in some banners that you see there's been a concerted effort over the last period to sort of support women leadership. You know from that perspective and there's other banners who I'm not seeing the same level or sort of commitment or noticeably an increase in women around particularly the boardroom tables etc. I think there's an imbalance from a group perspective as well across banners in showing that support towards developing women into leadership roles.” [P9]

Participants expressed the view that there was an inadequacy of females at an executive level. Noting that overall, there was a significant lack of women in executive and senior vice president positions with recent appointments predominantly favouring men, namely in COO and CEO positions. They noted that the boardroom reflects this imbalance with very few women represented. The organisation therefore needed to improve its efforts to enhance female representation at all leadership levels.

“The organisation as a whole, I think we can do better. I think that we've got quite a few females within vice president roles, executive roles. But I think recently most of the appointments have been male within the executive and vice president space, even within our COO and CEO space. So, I do think at a senior exec level we need to be getting better at it because I don't think we have enough female representation in that space.” [P1]

“Definitely not. I think we can count on the hand. The number of female VPs we have, in relation to the number of male VPs, even at a senior VP level, I think there might be one or two people, two females. So, given where we're at in this organisation? Not fairly representative.” [P10]

Participants were of the opinion that the Executive Committee (EXCO) seemed heavily male-dominated. They noted that there are very few women at the senior leadership level with only one or two females in the organisation's EXCO reflecting a significant gender imbalance.

“I think in finance we maybe have like around 40% or something like that and but in most other places in the organisation, it isn't as such. Look at our EXCO for example. Previous Exco was male dominated in the areas that mattered. If you look at the heart of the business and what the heart of the business is all about was male dominated.” [P2]

“I'm going to say no, because if I look at the senior leadership in the organisation, whether it's in my colleagues, the vice presidents above me, the EXCO, it is very male dominated. I'm in fact, I'm trying to think, there's two or one person on the organisation's EXCO that is female, I think it's just Person A and Person C. As far as Merchandise vice president's go there are none.” [P4]

Participants were of the opinion that female representation were typically involved in the softer, behind-the-scenes aspects of the business rather than in more prominent or operational roles. The extract from the interview transcripts following supports shows this statement.

“I'd say you know, it's funny. It's like a yes and a no. Yes, we have female representation, but I almost want to say it's on the softer dynamics of business.” [P11]

- **Timing and career**

The timing and career aspect relating to women in leadership was seen as a limiting factor. For some participants, they noted that they have turned down opportunities due to family responsibilities, thereby requiring a choice between career advancement and personal obligations.

“You know, from a woman perspective, I've had opportunities, I've turned down because of family responsibility and aspects. You know, you've got to pick the lesser evil at that point in time.” [P11]

Participants expressed the view that career progression was influenced by historical context and timing, necessitating existing leadership to retire before new opportunities arise.

“To me personally, it comes with history and timing of it. So sometimes you know you've got to wait for one set of leadership to retire and to move on for the next round to grow up. So, to me, as a young leader, what's more important to me is do I see representation in my successors right?” [P11]

- **Local versus foreigners**

Participants argued that the leadership structure had many key positions occupied by foreigners, raising questions about the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Concerns were also expressed by participants about promoting local talent and whether South African women were being given opportunities for advancement.

“Look at the current new structure, the Chief Operating officer is male, and he is a foreigner as well. If you look at the Chief Merchandising Officer, male, thankfully South African, but male and if you look at the Chief Growth officer, ok, great that it's a female, but she is also non-national.” [P2]

“So, what is that doing for diversity? And then yeah, look across the CFO, a role that matters. And white male, foreigner as well. So is that a company serious about diversity and inclusion is our company. And serious about growing South Africans and is our company serious about growing females? So, in our company, it's not just a female angle, there's also the local versus the international as well...” [P11]

- **Improvement in representation and opportunities**

Some participants felt that there was an improvement in female representation. This was informed by the following, over time, the organisation had evolved to highlight and empower women, with more females stepping into leadership positions in recent years. Participants expressed the view that historically, leadership roles were predominantly occupied by men, though progress had been made toward achieving gender balance, particularly in areas like the information technology department. Participants indicated that women had increasingly been given leadership opportunities, with some holding interim board-level positions.

“I would think if you looked at the positions being held by women in the organisation, that’s a 60-40% split, I think?” [P8]

“So firstly, let me start by saying I think there's been improvement, particularly over the last probably I would say five years and I've definitely seen more women step into leadership roles.” [P9]

“It’s got a lot better then. I’ve seen a huge improvement over the 23 years that I’ve been in this organisation. I think that females are being considered. I think that females are becoming a lot more confident in contributing. So, I think at this point. I think there is sufficient females in leadership positions, yes.” [P13]

Majority of the participants indicated inadequate support received. This was informed by the following:

- **Lack of support from female leaders**

Participants indicated that the organisation did not do enough to support women in leadership roles or facilitate their growth into those positions, indicating a lack of commitment and support in promoting female leadership. Furthermore, they noted that there was a lack of coaching and support from female leaders with male executives being more accessible and helpful compared to female executives. The following extracts from the interview transcript support this conclusion.

“I’ve also been personally coached and looked after by certain members of EXCO and it’s funny because the people in EXCO who actually don’t have time for me, are the females.” [P11]

“Whereas I’ve made many attempts to reach out to specific female executives, and they just either blow you off blatantly ... Whereas even if it’s 15 minutes, I find that male executives give thought, they give, you know real direction to you and specifics like and to me that is more important than to have a one-hour conversation with a female.” [P11]

“And if your leaders think it, not just one or two people trying to drive woman in the workplace, supporting women in the workplace. So, my immediate answer is no. We don't do enough to support women in leadership roles and growing them into leadership roles.” [P3]

- **Biasness for males**

Relating to the above, participants were of the opinion that there was bias in hiring practices that reinforced male dominance in senior leadership positions over a long period of time.

“For a long time, I do think that there is a confirmation bias in hiring practices that tends to reinforce the male dominance in senior leadership.” [P4]

Participants expressed the view that despite positive talk about leadership development, the leadership programmes were predominantly attended by males.

“I think they talk a good game, but if I look at my own experience, if I if I look just within my team of the people who are invited to go on the extended leadership programs, they are predominantly male. In fact, I have not signed up for any females within my environment to attend the extended groups which will help people, you know, set them up for success into their Vice-President type roles.” [P5]

- **Lack of advocacy and awareness**

Participants indicated that there was a further lack of advocacy and awareness programmes for women in leadership. They noted that there was a lack of publicity for women related programmes, which hindered knowledge of the opportunities that could promote growth for women. Participants argued that whilst initiatives such as the Red Shoe Movement and Women's Leadership Council were created to support and develop women in leadership, there was a lack of awareness among females in the organisation about how to access these programmes and support thereof.

“I think we do have opportunities that we've created in terms of like the red shoe movement and women in leadership council, but I don't think any female within the organisation actually knows, how do they get on the program. How do they support women? How do they form part of the leadership with the women in leadership council? How do they get onto it? Who runs it?” [P1]

“And I think there's not enough of publicity around it so that women are not really aware of the opportunities that do exist for them in helping them grow in their space or outside of their space as well.” [P1]

Participants were of the opinion that men seemed to pursue roles more intuitively and aggressively, while women often struggled to advocate for themselves in their roles and careers and this hindered the attainment of leadership roles.

“I also think that women aren't good enough at asking for it. I think that that's one of the fundamental differences is that even if I look at my current position. I had to fight and step up to get it. I had to push unbelievably hard for it. I think that men do that more intuitively than women do. So, I think that there's something around the creation of the role that men push for harder than women do.” [P4]

- **Lack of targeted development**

Participants expressed the view that whilst various initiatives existed to support career, there was no active targeting of specific genders or demographics for opportunities. Furthermore, participants noted the Women's Leadership Council celebrated the achievements of women but lacked programmes aimed at elevating women.

“I think there's various initiatives on the go which do help, but in terms of whether the organisation actively trying to target a specific gender or a specific target market around career progression and providing opportunities in our structures, I don't think they've actively or they've got that as an active agenda point.” [P12]

“We've got the Woman's Leadership Council, and you know that showcases what the woman in our organisation have done and have achieved. But in terms of actual programs to elevate one gender over another, or a specific type of individual over another and grow that, I haven't seen any evidence of that.” [P12]

Concerns were raised by participants about the inability to achieve effective leadership growth, which hindered female career advancement. Some felt that their current roles had reached a ceiling in their career. The following extracts from the interview transcript support this statement.

“So, if we can't even get the leadership growth right, I don't even know how we even going to think about focusing on females.” [P3]

“And that's coming from you see my lived experience up until recently I just felt stagnant. There was a point like where I had felt like this is when I came to Banner B as the senior, like as a financial control executive, although I've only been designated as an executive now, I just felt it was the ceiling for me. I never saw myself progressing beyond this role, until late last year, when we started having more career discussions, about where do you want to see yourself? What's your next move?” [P6]

Participants indicated that many executives had long tenures within the organisation and were far from retirement age, leading to feelings of stagnation. This situation raised questions with participants about the delays in progression and the opportunities for advancement.

“And also at the same time if you look in terms of cliques, the current structure at an executive level or the next level that I should be, most of the people that have been in those roles, they've been in the business for quite some time and they not even close to their retirement age that you sometimes feel like, what are you waiting for because retirement is so far ahead that you just feel like, yeah, I felt stagnant, to be honest.” [P6]

4.4.1.3 Sub-theme 4: Receipt of views, decisions and actions by others

This primary sub-theme examined how the views, decisions and actions by female leaders were received by others in organisation. The overall results imply a lack of support of female leaders' views, decisions and actions.

- **Value deficiency**

Participants indicated that there was a lack of value placed on the views and decisions by female leaders. The organisational culture was criticised for not valuing diverse opinions, where assertive individuals could silence others, particularly women. Participants expressed the view that the opinion of women often went unnoticed until a male colleague echoed the same thoughts, which were then praised.

“So again, I think the biggest thing is having the voice and being listened to. I find it even now, we are having a discussion in a meeting, your voice and opinion around where I think we can do differently. Hey, you are noted and then we move on and then a male will say exactly the same thing and suddenly it's the best suggestion on earth.” [P9]

“So, I think when you have a very opinionated person at the table, I think my views get lost because I'm not prepared to keep trying to talk over somebody. If you are not prepared to hear me out and or finish a sentence, then you don't deserve to hear my opinion.” [P5]

“When I talk about the organisation head office, terrible. Terribly pathetic. They don't value other people's opinions. They don't listen. They are very, it's all about me and it's a cultural issue and for me, I bring it back to it's a cultural issue and it makes the female issue even worse. There are individuals in that building that are very opinionated and very conscious of who they are and can actually shut you off and just shut you up. Not respectful of listening. They don't listen.” [P3]

Participants argued that there were limited opportunities for open sharing, and it became increasingly challenging to speak out or have your voices heard and gain credibility. This seemed to be related due to being female.

“So, we don't really get the opportunity to share openly, I suppose for one and simply because there hasn't been this communication or opportunity of conversation, I suppose accordingly around the topic. Like I say, when the previous CEO was around and we shared it, he, you know, he listened, and he took it. It's a conversation that I have with Chief Merchandise Officer.” [P9]

“Outside of my direct leadership, it does become harder to have my voice heard and harder to gain their credibility. I'm not sure if I can however attribute that to being female or just based on the fact that a lot of people in the organisation have a lot of opinions about how clever they are.” [P4]

For some participants, it required continuous efforts to demonstrate competence and gain buy-in and confidence from colleagues.

“What I struggle with or what I had seen as a woman or whoever. Firstly, you have to in any role that you come into, the biggest challenges I have is like I have to prove that I'm competent. I just felt initially when I started each role in at the organisation, the first stepping in, everybody thought I'm not competent or are you sure she's the right candidate? So is that first initial challenge that I have.” [P6]

“I have to like prove myself all over with every role I have that I'm competent, I know what I'm doing as a finance professional for them to gain buy-in, a confidence in what I do.” [P6]

There was also an attitudinal dynamic to how the views, decisions and actions of women in leadership were received. Some participants experienced blatant disrespect from peers and subordinates who did not acknowledge their role, particularly due to their gender. They felt that a male leader would not have been addressed in the same manner.

“He's an exec, as am I, and he didn't have that simple respect for me, for my role and for what I'm bringing to the table. And that was incredibly hard because I think it's the first time that I've actually had such blatant outward disapproval and disrespect. Over something that actually was out of my control, and I was trying to help fix it. So yeah, I think that was very difficult for me.” [P1]

“There are elements of people, and it's not restricted to level. So, I've had even people that reporting to me that show up being disrespectful and specially because you're a female.” [P3]

“I had a conversation with somebody as recent as December, where I actually said if this was a male leader you were talking to, you would actually not speak in that tone in that way or those words. So, I think at all levels, it doesn't matter. I think for me.” [P3]

One participant recalled how a colleague, whom they had never worked with before, began screaming at them during a meeting. The colleague criticised her and her team. The participant believed the specific person felt threatened by their efforts to improve processes and lacked respect for them as a female leader at the same level.

“Admittedly, it was very hard this year because a colleague, I never really worked with him before. I was asked to assist in the space and clear up something. And he started screaming at me in a meeting, in a room full of people, well, online anyway. But literally screaming at me, about how legal didn't do XY and Z and legal didn't do this. But anyway, he literally started shouting. And at the end of the day, he was one who looked bad because everyone in that meeting sent me messages to say you're ok because I was attacked. And it's simply because, I think I honestly feel that he was threatened because here was someone who was trying to find a process and fix it, but I also feel that he didn't respect me enough as a female and on the same level as him?” [P1]

4.4.1.4.a Culture and context

Participants expressed that there was a cultural and contextual element that negatively impacted on how female leader's views and decisions were received. It was found that there was a lack of standardised culture and despite having built rapport and respect, suggestions from women, especially on technical matters, were often dismissed or not taken seriously. Participants noted that there was also a lack of support observed across different trading banners, particularly during joint meetings, raising concerns about the culture in one specific area compared to others. Overall, there seemed to be a disparity in how opinions were valued across different banners, with female perspectives receiving less respect.

“I think I've built a lot of rapport and respect, so when I speak it gets listened to, but it's not the same across the group and then the moment you expand that audience, even within Banner B, I find there's inconsistencies there and that's where when females or any female will give us suggestion, especially if it's around a technical category, you know, then it almost gets viewed like oh, ok, you don't really know...” [P9]

“Outside of that, I think generally there's a difference between banners and Home Office. Again, I'm reflecting on me as a Banner C, Banner B and Banner C may be different, I'm told, and I heard, I'm not really sure, but I think, generally people are very opinionated about I and they don't value opinion. And if you're a female, it makes it even worse.” [P3]

Some participants noticed potential cultural differences, suggesting that South African women were more likely to allow themselves to be interrupted. According to participants, expatriate women, such as American women, seemed more confident and assertive in expressing their

opinions. This could imply contextual or cultural patriarchy and was supported by the following extracts from the interview transcript.

“And it is normally the male that talks over somebody else...” [P5]

“I have found that maybe it's a South African culture because I don't see that same behaviour from an expatriate. So, if you take an American, and I've been in many a meeting with different American woman, they have a lot more confidence I think, than the female South African does and they are OK also to talk over and clearly express their opinion... I don't know if it's a cultural thing, but from a South African perspective, I think the women are softer spoken and, but I could almost say allow themselves to be spoken over.” [P5]

- **Dependent factors**

Some participants felt that the reception of views, decisions and actions by female leaders were dependant on their creditability and track record, having supportive leadership, political affiliations, cliques and position in leadership. Participants expressed the view that having a strong track record of achieving goals and influencing decisions was crucial for having one's views taken seriously. They noted that over time, credibility was built through support from leaders, which helped ensure that opinions were listened to and valued.

“In order for your views and your actions to be taken seriously, you need to have a track record. And you need to have a track record of achieving goals and of being able to influence....” [P8]

“I've obviously built credibility, which is an important thing to do. Without having the credibility, obviously your views don't get taken seriously... You know that I give and that's what's built credibility, so when I give my viewpoints right now, it gets taken and it gets listened to.” [P9]

“I think that I'm fortunate that I have quite a lot of credibility in the organisation. I've been around for a long time, and I think I've established myself as technically sound, which gives credibility to my opinions, my views and my decision making.” [P4]

Participants indicated that there were also internal cliques that supported each other and made it difficult for those from outside the organisation to be fully accepted. They noted that both mixed-gender and male-only cliques existed within the various banners and noted that those within the cliques had an easier time implementing change due to established relationships.

“The organisation has cliques that I guess will get sorted out over time. And the cliques support each other. So, there is that. And those of us that come from outside, we still largely seen as outsiders.” [P2]

“So, in order for us to drive change, there’s quite a lot of relationship building that we’ve had to make, but the things that we’re trying to drive in the organisation has to be backed up by market intelligence and research for it to really be accepted, whereas those that are part of cliques, are able to drive the change easier because there’s these deep seeded relationships there.” [P2]

“We’ve got banner cliques for sure where I’ve seen males and females in banners that band together. So, there’s definitely banner cliques. There is a mixture of male and female cliques. And the male only cliques. So yeah, you definitely have that.” [P2]

Participants expressed the view that meeting dynamics varied based on an individuals' position. They noted that in meetings with direct reports, no one spoke over each other, and there was mutual respect for listening.

“And so, it varies, so your position does count because to be honest, nobody talks over me if I’m in a meeting with my direct reports, but the same way you apologize if you talk over somebody else and you back down and you hear them out. It’s not always the case, so I think, yeah, the dynamics vary depending on the personalities that you have around the table.” [P5]

Participants indicated that strong relationships built over the years contributed to being listened to and respected. With these established connections, there was a sense of trust fostered among colleagues.

“Mostly they’re well accepted. I have been fortunate enough that I haven’t had a lot of pushbacks. And most tend to listen when I speak. And I think that goes because of the relationships that I’ve built over the years and have been able to manage that.” [P1]

“I think also, because I’ve been here for so long, I’ve got relationships with a lot of people, and I’ve worked very hard on building those relationships... by virtue of the fact that I built the relationships I am heard, I’ve established the trust, I’m heard. I feel very comfortable, contributing in a meeting because I’m comfortable with the people that I associate myself with or that are sitting in the meeting.” [P13]

4.4.2. Main theme 2: Challenges and barriers

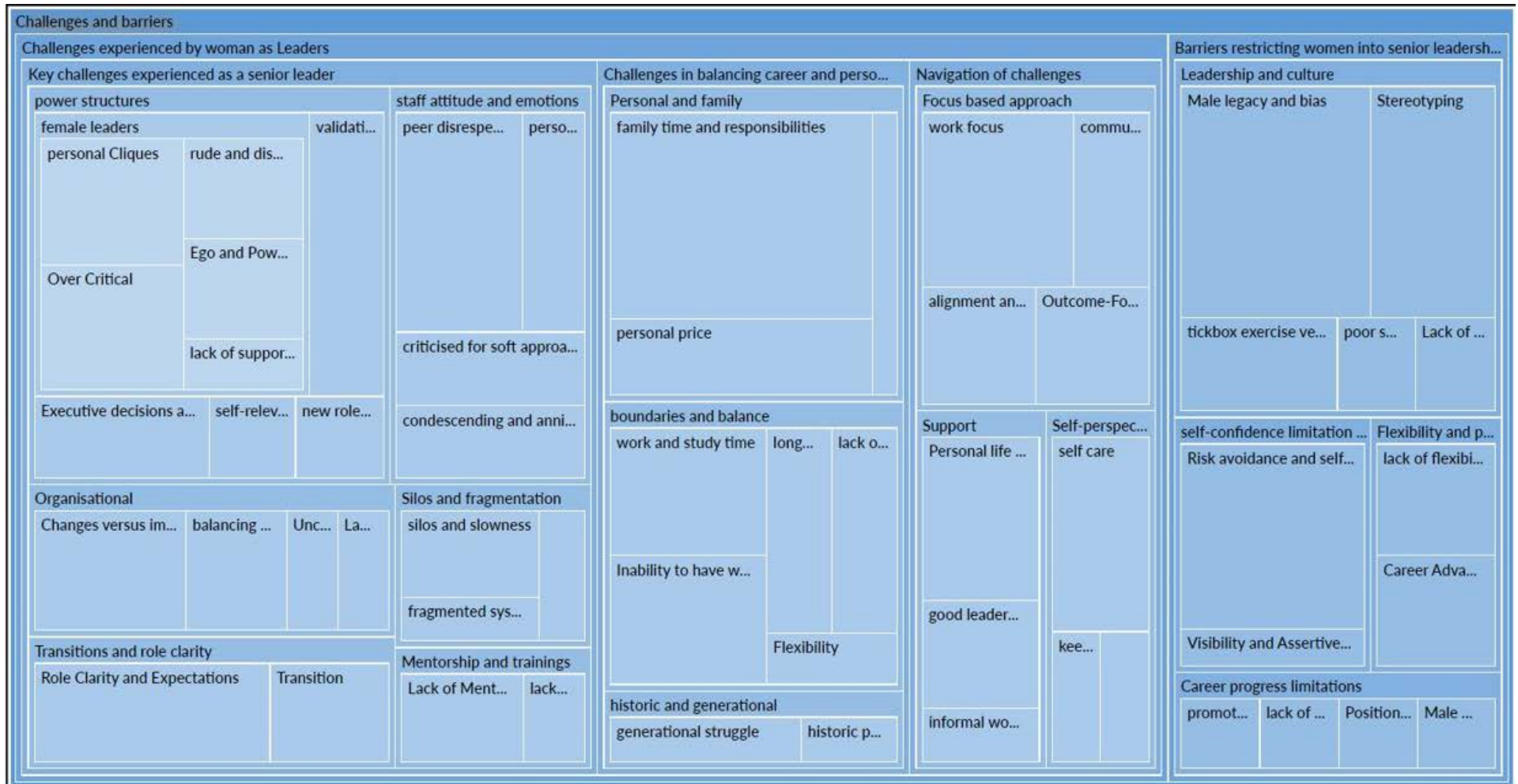


Figure 4-14: Hierarchy chart of challenges and barriers

This primary theme focusses on the challenges experienced by female leaders as seen in Figure 4-14 hierarchy chart and the barriers restricting women into senior leadership positions.

4.4.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Barriers restricting women into senior leadership positions

Barriers restricting women into senior leadership positions was informed by the following.

- **Leadership and culture**

Current leadership and culture were seen as a prominent barrier. This was due to the following factors:

- **Male legacy and bias**

Participants noted that historically, retail was recognised as a male-dominated field, and strategic roles were often held by men, with women more frequently positioned as executors rather than leaders in strategic initiatives. There was a gradual change observed in senior leadership by participants, with efforts to dismantle the 'old boys club' mentality. Participants, however noted that despite these changes, remnants of this culture persisted in some areas.

“I think over five years I've seen a change around senior leadership and rooting out sort of the old boys' club mentality. I think a big change actually came through, this is from my personal observation, when the previous CEO stepped into his leadership role. There were deliberate conversations around it and at that point in time there were a lot of the old boys' club that existed in the business. I started seeing kind of starting to fizzle out. I think there's still elements of it that reside within certain banners, so I definitely think it's a historic cultural element that sits there for one.” [P9]

“For me, the more I see it as a little more legacy, because if you look at the organisation, even when I joined at most strategic positions, they've always been a male dominated VP's or senior executives that in the past it just felt like women are more executors than they will be more involved in strategic initiatives.” [P6]

“But in other roles it is always been men, and it looks like it has always been the organisation's culture...” [P6]

- **Stereotyping**

Participants expressed the view that stereotypes persisted regarding gender roles in leadership, with expectations that women would lead HR functions rather than technical

or operational roles. Such biases influence perceptions of women's capabilities in leadership positions. In addition, participants were of the opinion that concerns existed about placing younger women in significant roles due to fears of maternity leave and related. Participants noted that men were also seen as better networkers. This implied a degree of stereotyping around male capabilities and emotional expression remained.

“I think it's just stereotypical...you'd almost expect a woman to lead the HR function versus a male. So, I think there's certain areas of a of a corporate organisation that are naturally led or historically have never been led by females. So, I think that stigma or that stereotype around a woman can't be a tech leader or a woman can't be an operator, or a woman would not do a good job as a as a man, as a store manager, for example. I think those stereotypes do exist still...” [P12]

“I also think, and I've heard this often, people nervous to put a woman into a bigger type of role, particularly if they are younger because there's always the nuance of, oh, they're just going to fall pregnant and then start a family and then all my training and stuff is for nothing. And so, there is definitely that bias of, oh, no, now what do I do? ... Because they're going to go off and have their six months of maternity leave, and then I'm going to be left with the gap...” [P5]

“Men are also far better networkers than females are, and I think again it's a combination of things where I know even when I was young and I had children and responsibilities at home, I would go home to do the homework and cook for dinner. Whereas even in my own experience, my husband, who's very supportive and was very involved in the kids bringing up would go for a quick drink with the team or do something.” [P5]

▪ **Poor succession planning**

Succession planning was identified as a critical barrier by the participants given the high turnover rate in senior roles at the organisation. Participants argued that there was uncertainty about whether discussions regarding succession planning were occurring, and concerns were raised about the demographics of identified successors. Participants indicated that successors should ideally be identified and trained within a two-year timeframe, especially for high-level strategic positions.

“I think the number one to me is succession planning, right. A lot of our EXCO are of a senior age and looking at turnover rate with the international organisation's head office, you know somebody's going to be in their role maximum three years... To me, I don't even know if the conversations are happening. Right, I could only hope through things that we've got in place

like STR, it is happening, but from your perspective and what is the demographics of those successes identified. I don't know, so succession to me is the biggest one.” [P11]

- **Career progress limitations**

Career progress limitation also posed a barrier to promotion of women into leadership roles. This was informed by the following:

- **Lack of mentorship**

Participants noted that there was a lack of mentorship of females for leadership roles. Some potential candidates could be prepared for such positions within three to six months with coaching and mentoring. However, male counterparts and executives often failed to take the initiative to nurture female talent for advancement.

“And if you don't feel that there's a female ready for it, then are you doing something to help her get there? Because potentially we have someone amazing that could actually do the role in three to six months. And they just need a little coaching, a little bit of mentoring to get there and I think where we often fail is that our male counterparts or male execs, don't necessarily take that on to say, let's nurture, you know Miss A into this role because she's going to be amazing at it.” [P1]

- **Positions not advertised**

Participants noted that senior executive roles were not advertised, and individuals were often being moved into these positions. This raised questions about the decision-making process behind these appointments and if they tend to favour male candidates.

“And when you look at the senior exec roles within the organisation, most often they don't get advertised, right? People get moved into it. So, the question is if people are being moved into it, who's making those decisions. And if you are, are you consciously thinking about the fact that it should potentially be the best fit whether its female or male? Or are you thinking ok, it's male because this is, this is what we've gone with, this is what we should.” [P1]

- **Male dominated interviews**

Participants were of the opinion that the current selection for final interviews demonstrated bias, with a predominantly male candidate pool. Participants noted that the organisation should ensure female representation in the interview process to provide equal opportunities.

“I know they often claim that it's because nobody is ready for the job, so they would blame the succession line... for example, so at that interview stage, I think they should absolutely drive a bias to say we at least need women representation at that interview stage. Otherwise, nobody's even set up for a chance to get the opportunity... there is a real bias I think, if you actually look at the candidates who are selected for final interviews. The ratio of male to female is not even. It's predominantly male.” [P5]

- **Promotion delays**

Some participants felt that it took them a long time to reach an executive level as their promotion only occurred after someone resigned, and they were placed in the role primarily because they were seen as capable of addressing existing problems. They felt that promotion should be a natural progression rather than a reaction to organisational issues.

“It's taken me this long to get to an exec level because I didn't have that support in a room. And it literally took someone resigning for me to get this role because it was suddenly, oh, Participant 1 knows how to fix this, so we can put her there because she'll actually solve the problems and that's literally why I was put in the role to fix the problems that were there. Whereas I know that, not just to fix, I actually do have the skills. I have the background, I have the experience, and I should have been asked to apply because of that, not because it's such a mess. And now I can fix it. And it should have been a natural progression that I should have gotten this role years ago. It shouldn't have happened now because people have resigned, and people have moved and now you need to fix the problem.” [P1]

- **Self-confidence limitation and risk resistant**

There were also self-placed limitations that affected women from attaining leadership positions. Participants noted that some women were hesitant to take on new responsibilities as they often wanted to fully understand a role before applying, unlike men who even applied with less confidence and knowledge. In addition, female leaders seemed to prefer the less risky paths, opting for familiar approaches rather than sudden change. Participants were of the opinion that women generally struggled with self-doubt, leading to lower confidence levels compared to men, which may hinder their advancement in the organisation.

“And I think women by nature shy away from the responsibility. So how do we give and build women, you know, to give them that sense of comfort that I can do it. A man will put up his hand for the job if he knows 70% of the job, whereas a woman will want to know 100% of the job before.” [P9]

“I do believe that women are more nervous to put up their hand to do a job they believe, and I'll speak for myself, even in my career, I wouldn't necessarily volunteer that I was ready to take the next giant step until I had actually proven for myself that I was capable of doing the job. So, I wanted to have almost practiced the role or verified that I was capable to do something, whereas men are the opposite. I believe they have an inherent sort of confidence that they show where they will almost wing it, so they're happy to say oh yeah, I can do the job, and they shout louder, and they appear more confident than a woman would in in that scenario.” [P5]

- **Flexibility and personal life**

The obligation of personal life and flexibility thereof also hinder women from leadership positions. Participants expressed the view that the personal life of women was more demanding than men. They noted that women starting families found it challenging to take opportunities due to their responsibilities. Furthermore, longer hours contributed to balancing personal life and work for women whereas men could be more flexible in this regard. Participants were of the opinion the organisation created a perception that male executives, who typically had fewer family commitments, were more dedicated and fitting for their roles.

“If the majority of one level, has a certain, say age and life phase to them. Are they expecting the same from the next level? ... what that does is for example, the phase that I'm in at the moment, starting a family, raising them, very young children, who need you there. So, I am unable to take every opportunity afforded to me. Or rather, I've got to be very strategic about those that I know I will have the support to do. So, if the successor group is at that similarity again, you're going to have the same problems when the roles open up, they might turn them down. When those roles open up, are they willing from an age perspective.” [P11]

“I think the one thing that gets to me, one thing that I am conscious of is that as women we want to succeed in our careers, but we can do it in eight hours. And unfortunately, the precedence is in most corporates is the harder you work and whether it is more hours or being flexible to join late evening calls or jumping on a plane to, further, your career by going to the international organisation's head office or just spending a week in Joburg, you know. That unfortunately takes, you know takes less of a priority for me because A) I'm only here for 8 hours. So am I being judged fairly against a male executive who is not married, no kids, has the flexibility to work later and is being seen as you know, a go getter because they are going above and beyond.” [P10]

Participants felt that the current rules and policies were more male-centric in nature and that there was a lack of flexibility and diversity. Hence, leadership needed to better understand the unique challenges women face and incorporate more flexible policies to support women.

“And I would say being flexible. You know, a lot of the rules and policies and so on, yeah, it's kind of the man's world. So, we need to have a look and factor in diversity, which I don't think we've actually done enough work off. It was actually sad to see the Vice President for diversity and inclusion leaving because she was actually driving a lot of that and driving that change.” [P2]

“Driving that change in thinking and in you know, in the leadership realms. It would be interesting to see who kind of takes over from her and starts to continue the work that she actually initiated. It was ground-breaking stuff that she was actually trying to drive in the organisation and but was constantly faced with constraints from top leadership, predominantly male. They may be married and so on, but they are male, but they don't understand the dynamics of being a woman and not truly. So, we need to be more flexible and have more flexible policies to kind of enable that.?” [P2]

4.4.2.2 Sub-theme 2: Challenges experienced by women as leaders

This primary sub-theme determined the challenges faced by women as leaders both professionally and in terms of personal life.

- **Organisational changes and the impact on delivery**

Organisational related challenges were highly ranked. Frustration was expressed by the participants regarding the inability to deliver innovative ideas and customer solutions quickly enough, which impacted sales growth. They noted business restructures and strategy changes hindered efficient delivery. In addition, participants were of the view that the constant shifting of priorities within the business prevented teams from fully addressing tasks before moving on to the next, thereby hindering overall effectiveness.

“I think one of them it links back to credibility so, I think there is this view in the organisation that tech is not a very efficiently structured or efficient from a delivery perspective to our business. I think that stems from multiple things. You know we've gone through multiple business restructures. We've gone through multiple changes in terms of strategy, in terms of business needs, in terms of business requirements and that necessarily hasn't necessarily translated well into delivery. So, I think challenges that we face, lack of delivery has equated into lack of confidence, which in turn creates difficult business discussions and tough business discussions.” [P12]

“I think the big one that sticks out for me, I'm thinking just in my time at Banner C is the constant changing priorities. I think that whereas a business, there's an element of it being necessary to keep up with the market to keep up with where, the business is headed to keep up with the strategy changing, but I think that there's those constant changing priorities. It keeps you moving from A to B to C, not really fulfilling A properly because you're moving on to B.” [P10]

There seemed to be a lack of a clear corporate identity and culture within the organisation that was noted by participants. Participants noted that there were varying cultures across different divisions, thereby highlighting the absence of a unified corporate culture.

“I think the first piece which is at the heart of everything is our corporate identity and our corporate culture. We don't quite know what that is. If you had to use words to describe the organisation's culture, what words would you use if you had to describe Banner C's culture? What words would you use if you had to describe Banner B's culture? What words would you use if you had to describe Banner A's culture? What words would you use? And as I've been thinking about that there are different words that I would use for each and every one of those areas, ok, so we don't have a corporate culture and a corporate identity.” [P2]

Similarly, the operating model within the organisation was unclear and this led to unclear roles and responsibilities. Participants indicated that there were multiple people working or accountable for a single task and this complicated processes and increased execution time. A properly defined operating model with clear roles and areas of accountability was seen as essential for facilitating meaningful change. The following extracts from the interview transcript support this statement.

“The second piece is our operating model. The roles and responsibilities, the blurred lines or lack of understanding who's accountable for what. Because you sometimes have 10 people accountable for one thing, and then you've got to engage with ten people to get something over the line, whereas and that increases your time to execute.” [P2]

“Whereas if you had a properly defined operating model, clearly defined roles and responsibilities in areas of accountability, it would make navigating through the organisation and driving change and value to the organisation easier...” [P2]

- **Power structures**

Power structures were evident and seen as a challenge. Power structures were informed by the below factors:

- **Female leaders' egos and power struggles**

There seemed to be power structure encompassing female leaders. Some participants found it more challenging to navigate relationships with female colleagues as opposed to men. Participants noted that this demonstrated potential feelings of ego, threat

and/or uncertainty among them, and it was also difficult to get guidance from senior female associates which could be influenced by their egos.

“One, I think it's talking to what I previously said about wanting to get time with senior female associates for guidance for feedback. It almost seems like it's a power struggle, so I've been trying for years with the same associate, you know. And I've had a really good line manager who told me straight, listen here, you're going to have to make it work because that person's in Exco and so her opinion matters. And so again I tried., I've tried, I've tried just nothing clicks, nothing clicks right. So, to me it comes down to an ego.” [P11]

“It's people above me and it's female. From a male perspective, I think I actually do get some support, even though it's not what I wanted to be, I think. And from a male perspective, I think it's more. I don't think it's uncaring. I think it's unconscious. More than anything else. And I think it's not understanding exactly what I'm asking for and why I'm asking for it when I'm asking for it. And from a female perspective, I'm not sure if it's being threatened, if it's feeling uncertain or what it is. And for me it's difficult. So yeah, it's across it's more female than male.” [P1]

- **Female leaders lack support for each other**

Women not sufficiently supporting each other in the workplace, with some feeling the need to compete rather than collaborate. Participants noted that such competitiveness and a lack of mutual support hindered collective growth for women.

“So, I don't think females are actually doing enough to support each other, and they actually climbing on other females. I don't know to be part of the male world or what. I have no idea. I just kind of be my own person. I'm don't pick on anybody, I pick on the system, on the process, play the ball, not the man. But it's not the way it's actually played with all the females in the organisation. So, we have that dynamic and it's not just the organisation You get this in other organisations as well. We are doing ourselves any favours by not supporting each other to grow.” [P2]

- **Female leaders being over critical**

Participants were of the opinion that female leaders tended to view their peers more critically than male leaders. They noted that this related to performance and output from junior colleagues. In addition, participants indicated, in conflict situation, women often engaged longer in disputes requiring mediation, while men might resolve conflicts more

simply by socialising together. The following extracts from the interview transcript support this finding.

“I do find though, that a woman leader tends to view other woman a lot more critically than what you necessarily would. So, I find that dynamic quite unique, ... whereas I think a male wouldn't be as critical and I think that's just based on that, the female is always generally from a corporate perspective tends to be the underdog sometimes. So, if you've reached a certain level, you sort of expect the same level of performance or output from people who are junior to you.” [P12]

“They fought nonstop. I don't know what else to say to you. I always, always had to get them in my office to sort out differences where sometimes I think men is a bit simpler. Let's go out for a beer, you know and then we sort it out between us. But woman, I had very, very strong leaders and everybody had an opinion.” [P8]

▪ **Personal cliques**

There were also cliques noted by the participants, amongst senior female executives where personal friendships influenced professional interactions and accountability. Hence, accountability varied based on relationships, resulting in different treatment of staff. One participant noted facing resistance from a female leader when proposing changes, only to see those changes accepted later when suggested by another friend of that leader.

“I don't know if I would call it a power structure, I don't want to use the word clique, but it almost feels like there's a clique of senior female execs. And it's their way. And also, because they share a friendship beyond just work. Their behaviours are reflected based on their friendship, and so often times what happens is as an example, you need to meet a deadline, and I have been called out in meetings with various people to say you have haven't met your deadline and you haven't sent this to me. Please can you do so and the person on their level that's part of that clique as well has also missed a deadline, and it's like, hey, just a nudge to remind you to get it out. So, it's completely different, right?” [P1]

“They are some females only cliques as well. I recommended something about four months ago and it was always faced with resistance, and this was to a female leader. And the change was actually affected a month ago because other female leader told this female leader the same thing that I had said with the daytime facts behind it. But I was faced with resistance, and that person wasn't because the two of them are friends from way, way, way back. So that's just the way it is.” [P2]

- **Rude and disrespectful**

Leadership efforts were hindered by negative behaviour. Participants expressed the view that rudeness and a lack of solidarity were more noticeable at higher levels, while lower levels were different.

“And the unfortunate part of that, it was actually a female that was doing that right. And a large part of trying to get the buy in and be the leader that I needed to be, was hindered by almost bitchiness that was going around.” [P7]

“I notice sometimes the females are even a bit ruder with each other. I don't feel females in the organisation generally support each other. Doesn't matter what level you are, I don't feel they do. As you got up in higher levels, it's more prevalent. You can see it's more obvious, whereas the low levels it's a little bit more different.” [P3]

- **Executive decisions and cliques**

Participants were of the view that cliques within the executive committee influenced decision-making. Participants indicated that power dynamics were evident, with EXCO voices pushing for decisions, leading others to seek support from peers to challenge or clarify the feasibility of those decisions.

“I mean, this is obviously just I don't have because I don't sit on the organisation Exco, I haven't heard this in real time, but I have heard anecdotal evidence that there are partnerships on that executive committee in terms of how they try and force opinions or convince other team members or other EXCO members that you know this alliance has got the right idea. So, and I say I've heard of that, but I don't, I haven't obviously experienced or seen it ...” [P12]

“There is and sometimes with the power play comes with those signals like, if there is someone more senior or from Exco wants this to be done like this, then in most cases when it's coming from those voices, I know I can't go by myself and say that's not possible. I need to get at other finance leaders involved and say this is what they want to do, and this is not possible. Please go back me up in this position because this is not the right thing to do or what they thought would be the result is not what will actually be. Cause sometimes it's that misalignment of what the impact will be, yeah.” [P6]

- **Validation**

Participants felt that there was a constant need to prove oneself, especially as a woman. They noted that this often required validating one's input, while male

counterparts could express ideas without the same scrutiny. Participants found it challenging to gain recognition, especially in environments where they were not expected to be knowledgeable. The following extracts from the interview transcript support this conclusion.

“I've actually, this week ... been told by three people, like, just own it. You deserve a seat at a table. Can you stop saying sorry you're new? But it's come from these experiences with people who are specialists in this area, their whole lives. To me, I form the opinion that people who are specialists form the danger of ego and experience talking rather than, you know, expertise and mindfulness. And I think as women, because we have to almost prove ourselves constantly, as you know, demonstrating that we deserve a seat at the table. I'm finding now where I am, the egos talk more.” [P11]

“You've got to validate while you're saying something, etcetera. Whereas a male will say it gets taken and we move forward. So, I think that's the draining part of the challenge that we constantly have to validate and feel whether we feel we have to validate it now, but I've heard this opinion from a lot of women who say sometimes they don't get taken seriously...” [P9]

- **Employee attitudes and emotions**

Another challenge that participants encountered related to fellow employees and peer attitude and emotions.

- **Peer disrespect and lack of support**

Participants expressed the view that lack of support and respect from immediate peers was a significant challenge, with peers often failing to recognize roles and titles. Participants noted that there was a sense of being undermined during discussions, leading to personal attacks aimed at establishing superiority. There also seemed to be a need to escalate issues to receive adequate support.

“I think it's lack of support from my immediate peers. Disrespect from immediate peers. Where they don't recognize my role or my title, and to be honest with you, I don't recognize my title half the time and I'm not the person that throws it around. But sometimes people need to understand and respect that you have a role to do, and they need to let you do it and trust that if you need help, you'll come to them. And I think for me, the challenge is not having someone that believes in you or trust that you can get it done and doesn't support you. And this is my immediate peers within my team.” [P1]

“You need to escalate to get their support, so for me they don't value individuals and other people. And the role they play in the organisation and as a result of that, they just don't support you very well.” [P3]

- **Condescending and annihilating**

Participants were of the opinion that women often faced harsher treatment than men, experiencing criticism from both male and female peers. Instances occurred where female colleagues undermined each other, leading to a lack of support and a sense of being attacked during presentations to executive committees. The following extracts from the interview transcript support this statement.

“It is a known male dominated environment and despite me saying I don't believe the way in which you want to do this, the systems you want to implement in another banner is not right. This is how we did it from an SAP perspective. I was told I have don't have the foggiest idea what I'm doing, despite being able to successfully implement numerous times SAP and the men would ban together, and they would decide this is what it's going to be, and it was a major stuff up to say the least.” [P8]

“From a culture perspective, as females, you are generally annihilated more than men. So, I think they are bit harder on you than men because there is a bit of the boys' club still in this organisation. So, when you go to EXCO to actually present something and I'm not talking hypothetically, it's happened to me several times. We get completely annihilated by EXCO when you are going through with a rational logical forward-thinking agenda. So that definitely is a constraint as females. I don't think females in the organisation support each other because I've been annihilated by females in these conversations as well. I wouldn't say I was only annihilated by men. I've had females whisper into men's ears in these sessions, then they'll kind of align and then they attack.” [P2]

- **Criticised for soft approach**

Participants received criticism for having a softer leadership approach and the softer approach was seen as counting against effectiveness in leadership roles. Participants felt that this led to a lack of recognition for accomplishments, this type of leadership was overlooked compared to more aggressive styles.

“So, I have been criticized though in the way that I lead that I haven't been harsh enough or that my softer approach, there's the opinion that a softer approach is less effective, which I

disagree with. So not with my current leadership, but in the past, I have been criticized for not being more forceful and more male...” [P4]

“And I think that counted against me because I wasn't seen as forceful enough. I don't think that makes me less effective, in the way that I lead but it does diminish the recognition for what you've accomplished. Because if you just accomplish it quietly without all the fanfare and yelling and table banging, and you just make things happen ..., you avert crisis that nobody even knew was about to happen.” [P4]

▪ **Personal versus professional conflict**

Participants indicated that some leaders focused on their personal goals and recognition, losing sight of the organisation's priorities and the needs of customers and stakeholders. In addition, it was noted by a participant that some individuals took professional disagreements personally, which is supported by the following extract from the interview transcript.

“The second thing is, is somebody actually said this in such a beautiful way the other day is we all want what's best for the organisation. And sometimes we've got different ideas of what's best for the organisation. And so, your plan and my plan conflict each other, but we take it as a personal conflict, rather than a conflict on strategy.” [P11]

“Also trying to drive their own goals, right? They want to be in the limelight. And they feel sharing something with you is you know, so they almost like they losing focus for what's most important, which is the organisation and the associates and customers, right.” [P3]

• **Mentorship and training**

The lack of mentorship and trainings remained a challenge for development of women in leadership. Participants indicated that there seemed to be an assumption that individuals in senior roles inherently understand their responsibilities, but many lack the necessary guidance and training. Hence ongoing training was necessary not only for skills development but for learning how to distinguish between personality clashes, differing opinions, and strategic conflicts as was raised by participants.

“And I think training of leaders to be able to identify personality clashes versus opinions versus strategy clash is so important. I think in this organisation it's been taken for granted that if you're in a senior

role, you know how to act suitably for that role. You know what it means to be in that role and quite honestly, people don't because we don't have the guidance. We don't have the training.” [P11]

The lack of a mentorship in the organisation was highlighted as a hindrance to career advancement by participants, emphasizing that mentors play a crucial role in providing opportunities and support.

“And I think from a great group level, I think, sometimes you know we talk often about mentors, and we talk about getting a coach and a support. I'm in the business going to be nine years, I still don't have a mentor, and I've asked for it. And I think that's also kind of what hinders me because a mentor is someone that's going to throw your name in a meeting and give you that extra opportunity within the organisation. And I feel like, honestly, it's taken me this long to get to an Exec level because I didn't have that support in room.” [P1]

- **Silos and fragmentation**

The elements of silo-ship and fragmentation created challenges from a systematic perspective. Participants argued that employees seemed to work in an individual manner with individual responsibilities rather than collective ones within the organisation. This led to slow responses and a reluctance to share information, thereby affecting overall collaboration.

“So, in my own role, what I find challenging is people see my deadline and my deliverable as mine. They don't see the role that each individual plays in the bigger role of... the organisation as a result of that, they slow to respond. They are unwilling to share information.” [P3]

“We're working on it, but all three teams didn't sit together to say, ok, we are all working on the same thing, the same goal is to make sure we get the ..., but nobody actually stopped and said alright, let's divide and conquer. Let's help each other out holistically on this. And so, we all want again what's best for the organisation, and we all are doing it in the way we think that's best. But we've got conflicting interests. And what that means is conflicting expectations for associates to deliver, and that's what's disabling us from actually meeting that finish line.” [P11]

- **Transitions and role clarity and expectations**

Role clarity due to business transitions posed challenges to participants. Participants indicated that challenges arose over the past two to three years due to business transitions where some roles seemed more like titles without clear responsibilities.

“And I think this is for the past two years or three years with everything that has happened with the transition in the business, you know we're changing the finance structures and even everything. So, with my role and us being a finance department, it's more some days you need to like consciously to be aware of what you're doing on a daily basis and that sometimes you have a role it's more of a title than it's any role and responsibilities that you find yourself.” [P6]

Relating to the above, there was frustration from participants about the lack of clarity in role expectations when transitioning from senior manager to executive, with unanswered questions about the differences between the two levels. There were also concerns about performing tasks that may be at junior level, due to insufficient definition of responsibilities, especially after multiple organisational transitions.

“From a personal perspective, I was a senior manager, one who was given an opportunity to be seconded and act in an executive position, right, and I wanted to make it a success. I saw it as my opportunity to prove to EXCO that I am capable of working at that level and I deserve to be at that level. And I worked so hard and push and drove HR to tell me what is the expectation between a senior manager one and executive? Why is it different? To this day, eight months later, I haven't been given an answer. The only answer I've got is look at your JD, but your JD is your tasks and your responsibilities. It's not the characteristics between each level. It's not what you have to demonstrate at a leader at the different levels and to me that is the clarity that we're missing to enable succession success.” [P11]

“I think that the key challenges that I've experienced are related to the lack of clarity around what's actually required. And so, I think that it does become a case of actually having to tell people what you've done rather than have what you've done recognized because there isn't always the clear expectation of what should be delivered.” [P4]

4.4.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Challenges in balancing career and personal life

Having established the challenges at professional level, this sub-theme outlined the challenges of balancing career and personal life.

- **Personal and family**

Personal sacrifices and family responsibilities were a highly ranked factor for participants.

- **Family time and responsibilities**

The struggle to balance work and family was strongly highlighted as women often carried additional responsibilities at home. Participants noted that there was a challenge in balancing work and family life, with limited time spent with family and

children due to long working hours. Some participants faced criticism for prioritising family over career, while others tried to find ways to integrate both. Some participants even resorted to finding schools with minimal homework to reduce stress and focus on family time.

“Right now, I'm in a crazy phase... I saw my child for half an hour yesterday. I left home too early. I came home half an hour before she went down for the night. So only had those 30 minutes with her. But you know it's what you do to enable that she's still ok and that the family still ok.” [P11]

“So, I think, work-life balance and balancing family is always the most difficult thing, and you know, there's always this tendency sometimes where I feel like I almost have to explain why I can't make a very early morning meeting or why I actually don't want to stay late in the afternoon.” [P9]

“I dedicate my weekends to my kids and some of the things that I've made in my life that I realized, even earlier on I'm not good in, you know, the three triangle homework, all those things that are has strategically chosen schools for my kids, where there's minimum homework to be brought to home, because that way it has less stress on me and I can focus.” [P6]

▪ **Personal price**

Some participants admitted to sacrificing their personal life to manage work, especially without having children. In addition, some felt that early career experiences of struggling with work-life balance affected their relationships. Participants conveyed that perhaps the earlier generations should have pushed for changes in the work environment.

“I think it's the multiple roles and the whole, 9-5 of work and females fighting to get into the world of work but not fighting to change the way the world of work. I think there's leaders' generations ahead of us that should have actually started to make that change and make the dent. And we kind of facing the consequences of that now.” [P2]

“So, I must admit that up until this year, I wasn't having a challenge balancing it. I just sacrificed my personal life I supposed, but you know not having kids I think does make me somewhat unique from a female perspective.” [P4]

“Since I've come to the organisation, I don't have that much, to be honest. I think I learnt it earlier on in my career the results of balancing work life and everything and I paid some prices, relationship wise and everything. That's why I am where I am.” [P6]

- **Female guilt trip**

There was a feeling of constant guilt in balancing work and family, especially as a woman that was raised by participants. Such guilt trips arose from missing children's activities while at work and from not giving enough attention to them when working from home. Despite putting in more than enough hours, the sense of not doing enough remained with participants.

“So, I think that again, I think it's a thing that we carry as women, you are guilty when you're at work that you're not watching your child sports, game or match whatever and you are guilty when your home working and you're not giving your child attention. So, you live with this perpetual guilt all the time. I leave to fetch my children from school and then I work from home. When I walk out of here, I feel guilty because I work and I put in my hours and I put in more than my hours, that you live with this guilt that people think that you're not giving enough.”
[P13]

- **Boundaries and balance**

Participants noted that it was difficult to put work-life boundaries in place and attain balance. This was due to the following:

- **Long hours and always-on culture**

Participants noted that for some departments, such as the technology department, it meant being continuously available with team members on standby. Long hours were common inclusive of being online even afterhours.

“You've got to be on call all the time, and there's escalations left, right and centre. And so, what I tend to do is, I tend to come into the office early, so by 7 and not leave before 6:00, so I get time in before the workday really starts at the end of the workday that ends to get admin sorted out and clear your mailbox and things like that. And then when I get home, I don't have to put my laptop on because I find that when you get home and then you put your laptop up and you have to start working and you tend to lose track of time and before you know it's 11:00 at night and you haven't shut down.” [P12]

- **Inability to have work- life boundaries and balance**

Some participants found it exceptionally hard to draw work-life boundaries due to work demands leading to prioritising work over personal life. Achieving balance seemed

complex, leading to the acceptance of integrating personal and professional responsibilities, such as attending a child's event and working later to complete tasks.

“Drawing the line between my work time, my personal time, I think I've been exceptionally bad at doing that, and I often want to make sure that my work is done to the detriment of my personal life.” [P1]

“I never found balance. Do you know when the light went up to for me? It's when she one day said you will never find balance. You will simply integrate your personal and your professional life. ok, so you will find that today 10:00, I'm going to my child's athletic or ballet recital, but tonight, 8:00 I'm sitting behind my desk and I'm finishing that work that was supposed to be finished, so it's an integration.” [P8]

▪ **Work and study time**

For some participants, studying consumed much of their time, while another reflected on difficulties in pursuing leadership programmes due to family responsibilities. It seemed easier for men to study as opposed to women.

“Think that's one of the one of the biggest challenges and then obviously the amount of time you can put into studying and advancing yourself because again it comes back to where's the work life balance. Where's my family balance? You know? Can I fight to be on the leadership program where I'm out of the country for a month at a time, a week at a time? Do I have the support at home? Whereas I think with the man it's much easier.” [P9]

“What I have found though now studying has made it a lot more complicated, and it's made me a little bit more selfish, in all honesty. Furthering my education is important to me, and that's actually that means that I've got to put some boundaries in place.” [P4]

▪ **Flexibility**

For some participants, prior to changes in leadership, there was a lack of flexibility in the workplace. There was no option to work from home or leave the office early to avoid traffic. This rigid approach was a significant challenge for their personal lives.

“Biggest one is time and up until, so I'm now going to talk about pre-Banner C and pre -Miss A and Mr B, who are just wonderful. I'm going to talk about the flexibility before this. I think that you know, before we became a consolidated organisation, I'm not sure what it was like a Banner C, but we were quite rigid with the flexibility. I mean, you know, there was no such thing as work from home. There was no such thing as you can take a call from the car on the way to

fetch your kids. Or you need to leave the office early to miss traffic. The flexibility of that was a big thing for Banner A.” [P10]

- **Historic and generational**

The imbalance of work and personal life seemed to be a historic and generational struggle for women.

- **Historic prejudicial**

One participant mentioned that when starting in 1999, the workplace reflected the lingering effects of apartheid, predominantly featuring white employees, with few people of colour. Hence challenges included a white female boss who prioritised career over personal life, making issues out of taking leave, getting married on short notice, and going on maternity leave. These conditions created significant difficulties.

“The challenges I had is that my female boss, was similar to that many years later. They were just so career focus that your work, your personal life was like they were just not considered about it at all. Taking leave was an issue. Leaving 5 minutes early was an issue. Getting married at three months of notice was an issue. Going on maternity leave was, everything was just an issue. So, for me, those were some of the really, really challenging times, I had leaders thereafter like previous male leader, a couple of other leaders thereafter that helped change that kind of mindset a bit.” [P3]

- **Generational struggle**

While participants noted that progress was made towards equality, foundational societal expectations regarding roles as mothers, wives, and daughters remained unchanged. Participants felt that cultural expectations placed a heavy burden on women with the notion that their primary role was at home. This pressure contributed to the multiple challenges faced by female leaders. There was a recognition that previous generations of leaders should have initiated changes in the workplace to address these issues.

“But if you come from an Indian background, black background, etc, you know it was always the woman's place at home. You got to sort your kids out, you got to do that. So, I think a lot of that weighs heavily, more so on a female leader of colour because there's still this expectation that you've got to do that. And so, you're fighting battles.” [P9]

“I think it's the multiple roles and the whole, you know, 9-5 of work and females fighting to get into the world of work but not fighting to change the way the world of work. I think there's leaders' generations ahead of us that should have actually started to make that change and make the dent. And we kind of kind of facing the consequences of that now. And our thinking is very different now you know, to the generations before us. And I suppose we have a lot of data to see what's happened as well over the generations to actually resulting in where we are at. It's like a double-edged sword, right? We fought to be where we are today. We are fighting for more and more equality in the ways of work, but some of the foundational societal stuff has not changed in terms of our role as mother, wives, sisters, daughter all those roles that we still have and the responsibilities in each of those has not changed.” [P2]

4.4.2.4 Sub-theme 4: Navigation of challenges

This sub-theme examined how women in leadership tried to navigate through challenges faced.

- **Support**

Having key support was the highest ranked factors by participants in terms of navigation through challenges. This was informed by the following:

- **Personal life support strategies**

Participants indicated that from a personal life perspective, strategies for achieving work-life balance included shifting work schedules between spouses to accommodate each other's commitments. There was an emphasis on the importance of discussing support systems at home, particularly for women seeking to advance their careers. Additionally, reliance on family members and hired assistance (such as domestic workers) did help participants to manage children's activities and household tasks. Some even prepared meals on weekends in order to keep a balance.

“My husband needs to work on Sundays, so I'll work Saturday. Then he works Sunday, so we shift and to me, that's where the balance comes in. And this is how the senior leader explained it is you're not going to win every day. We're not going to make it to cook, to wash our hair, to go to the gym, to have good makeup and clean clothes on every day. It's like it's not happening, but if we balance it overall and at least some days in the week, even if it's just twice a week, we try and do something physical, you know, at least, you know, try and have nutritious meals for the family. Some weeks are going to be hectic and you're going to have to defrost macaroni and cheese and it's ok.” [P11]

“Ok, so my son and what happens to my son every day, school is cool, but what happens after school? My daughter, and what's all those extra murals and all that stuff that she's got to get up to after school? And then I have support there. My dad picks them up from school and takes them for all the extra murals, sorts all that stuff out... And then in terms of the household, I have a full time, seven days a week helper...And then when it comes to cooking and you know all of that sort of stuff, I prepare for the week on a Sunday morning...” [P2]

- **Good leadership**

For some participants, having a good leader was pivotal. Some leaders demonstrated respect and appreciation for women, fostering a balanced executive committee with equal representation of men and women. This inclusive atmosphere allowed all members to have a voice and feel valued.

“So, in supply chain it changed, but the biggest change for me came when Person A, became the CEO of Banner B. He was raised by a single mother. He had a huge, huge respect and for woman and appreciation for woman... he on face value didn't treat us any differently and he had around half men half woman on his Exco. HR was a woman at a stage, finance was a woman. Operation's was a woman. Supply chain was a woman..., he ran a very balanced Exco, and we all had a voice around the table and that is when you actually grow, when somebody trusts you and believe in you.” [P8]

“Could we have flourished if it wasn't Person A, and it was a woman? Probably it brings me back to the attitude of the person. You know, is it male or female? Could be, but it's more around who you are, how you lead. How you engage with people that makes the difference, and currently I report to a male and who gives me complete freedom. Who trusts me and once again, you flourish when that is the environment that you work in. Your opinion matters, you have a voice. You're allowed to give feedback. You're allowed to have a different opinion. And you heard, and it matters. And you're taken seriously.” [P8]

- **Informal work mentors**

To maintain balance, some participants connected with informal mentors who provided guidance in navigating various situations. This allowed for bouncing ideas off each other and gaining different perspectives which helped in responding to challenges.

“To keep that sanity at the workplace, yeah, there are some people at work as well that I connect with. I'd like to call them informal mentors because I don't have any formal mentors. There's a couple of people that I connect with that help me navigate through situations. I'm able to bounce

things off them, you know, help me see the other side of things. Help me respond in a way that doesn't, you know, cause people don't like to be told they wrong, right?" [P3]

- **Focus based approach**

Some participants adopted a focus-based approach which entailed the following.

- **Work focus**

Some participants indicated that they chose to ignore distractions to maintain work productivity. It was important for them to concentrate on work tasks rather than getting caught up in office politics, advocating for a return to the core objectives of their work to avoid distractions.

"Not interested in getting involved in he, she or whatever. Just keep focusing on what needs to be done. And I think for me, that's how I navigate. Focus on the task at hand. Focus on what you are here to do. Just your job." [P3]

"Keep bringing it back and people back to the work and what we're here to do rather than getting involved in those power structures that they are taking place because those are very distracting and not." [P3]

- **Outcome-focused approach**

An outcome-oriented approach helped to explore alternative methods for achieving better results. Participants noted that it took time to fully grasp a new role, develop a comprehensive strategy, and establish objectives before executing a plan. Seeking advice from respected colleagues also assisted in this.

"And when I go into a role and it takes time for me to understand it, but I've got to understand it fully, big picture, understand all the components of what I have and then. It's taken me shorter in other roles ..., I must tell you it took me like 3 months to get there. It's taken up the longest ever in my entire career and took me about 3 months to get this thing, to develop my strategy, develop my objectives, my key focused areas and my vision, all of that." [P2]

"I think that I do look at the outcome that I'm looking for and I go what, do we need to accomplish here and what's the most effective way of accomplishing that. And if I find that I'm not accomplishing it through my natural style then, and I'll try and find a different approach to it and I'll seek advice from people that are I respect in the organisation and that I see leading

effectively and ask if there's a different way that I can approach something to get a better outcome.” [P4]

- **Alignment and priorities**

Participants expressed that staying aligned with direct leadership regarding weekly priorities and goals did help. There was also an understanding of when to prioritise tasks, particularly during busy periods like year-end audits or project deadlines. Participants noted that this could promote flexibility in balancing home and work commitments.

“So, the big one is just always to be on the same page as my direct manager as my leader to be in terms of what is the priorities, what is the goals for the week we can only do. We can only do these top five.” [P10]

“So, for me, I've learned to define what is urgent and when do I prioritize. I know when its year end and I'm busy with auditors and even when the business is busy on a project, that's when I'm willing to bend over my boundaries in terms of my home structure and the work structure and I have even made a conscious decision that unless the building is on fire.” [P6]

- **Communication**

Participants were of the opinion that maintaining clear communication and visibility within the team was essential for ensuring alignment and meeting expectations. In addition, engaging in conversations with team members and providing mentorship assisted in providing a sense of purpose and motivation in the work environment.

“To use you know, the rest has to wait until next month end that communication and constant visibility as to what the team is busy with and making sure we're all on the same page and you know expectations are met.” [P10]

“And then also, what really keeps me going also is having conversations with people like you, with people in the team to help grow them, right? I'm so passionate about supporting them in seeing what they can achieve and where they can be and helping them grow and just being there for them as well, right. And so, I do a lot of that mentorship conversations, checking in all of that does help me. Help me navigate through it. It just gives me a bigger purpose around things.” [P3]

- **Self -perspective**

Some chose to maintain self-based perspective and focus on dealing with challenges. This included the following.

- **Keeping a structure**

Keeping a structure was useful. For some participants, a structured weekly schedule was maintained to balance family and work commitments. For example, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, dance classes with their children took priority, leading to early departures from work, when necessary, with the intention to return online later.

“But normally we have structure, we know what we do on the Monday, we know what we do the whole week and that's how I support my family and work wise and even when, for example, Tuesdays and Thursdays I am in dance classes with my daughter. So, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I make no excuse. I would leave work early if it means that it's a busy day, I will come back online later on because I need to take my daughter to a dance lesson.” [P6]

- **Self-care**

Efforts were made by some participants to prioritise personal well-being by incorporating exercise into their schedule. This included notifying others about unavailable times for meetings, such as Thursday afternoons dedicated to exercise classes.

“And he recently told me that he now can see that I have lots of fun because I have really worked on trying to be like, ok, I can't work all the time. So, what am I going to do? And I'm going to put exercise in my diary, and that's ok.” [P7]

“I'm going to tell people I'm not going to take a meeting at 4:30 on a Thursday because I will be doing my exercise then, and I'm going to an exercise class and that's ok. But it's being conscious about trying to put that into play.” [P7]

- **Compensating**

For some participants, they preferred to overcompensate by putting in extra hours into the night and on weekends. This was done to ensure contributions and to demonstrate commitment.

“Well, I think, you overcompensate. So, I think, I overcompensate. So, I put in the extra hours. I’ll work till 8,9, 10 o clock. At night, I’ll work on the weekends. It’s to make myself feel better, but it’s also to make the community that I associate with at work know that I give and take. So, I take but I absolutely give back more than my fair share.” [P13]

This primary theme as reflected in Figure 4-15 hierarchy chart, established the support needed by female leaders to enhance their performance and career development as well as factors informing the promotion of more women into leadership positions.

4.4.3.1 Sub-Theme 1: Support needed by female leaders

The results imply that women in leadership need support to enhance performance and career development.

- **Feedback, awareness and recognition**

There was a need for feedback, awareness and recognition from peers and male counterparts in leadership.

- **Listening and acknowledgement**

Listening and valuing women's opinions is crucial, as many participants often feel unheard in meetings. Hence, providing women with a platform to express their thoughts and feelings was important as many may not have had that opportunity. Participants indicated that overall, creating a comfortable environment where women feel that their contributions are appreciated can encourage more women to step into leadership roles.

“Starting point is we just need people to listen. Women just need to be heard. In general, people need to be heard. But just I think women, you know... I'm saying, we're sitting in a board room or in a meeting room, so how often do you say something? It's not heard, but another person, a male, will say the same thing again or somebody else in the leadership position, and it will be heard.” [P3]

“I think for me it's just being deliberate, listening, showing like you actually value their opinion, how you respond, how you make them feel. I think for me, the more you make them feel more comfortable and like they belong and like their opinions are valued, you'll get more people that will put up their hands, more females that will come through the leadership.” [P3]

- **Feedback and knowledge**

Participants noted that having regular feedback from line managers who show genuine interest in employees' career aspirations was essential, along with key support to achieve those goals. It was hence crucial for individuals to receive honest and open feedback from someone who could advocate for them. Participants indicated that

women's forums were essential to coach and educate women on the importance of speaking up and asking for what they needed to build their confidence.

“And you do need that because as I said, it's very important. For somebody to talk for you and to give you that honest and open feedback. And I think what we can do is be and I've seen it, so in those woman's forums that Banner B used to run, and I've seen some phenomenal ones in operations running at the moment where you almost have to coach and educate the women that they need to speak up and they need to ask. So, it's because I think it's just to help build that confidence.” [P5]

“So, it's having that frequent feedback having your line manager actually taking interest in your career and where you want to go and where you want to see yourself and also being realistic with you about whether you can achieve that and what do you need to do in order to achieve it.” [P7]

- **Awareness of unique challenges**

Participants expressed the view that there needed to be greater awareness of the challenges faced by women, especially those with families. Hence some advocated for having a core group of women who shared similar challenges, allowing for the sharing of stories and mutual support in overcoming difficulties. One participant indicated that the organisation should be cautious that some initiatives e.g. Red Shoe Movement caused segregation of women.

“Yeah, I think that we need to be a little bit more aware of the challenges that women have, particularly women that have a family. What I don't like is this whole Red Shoe Movement thing... In fact, I got asked to be part of it, and then I pulled away. Because women should be seen, we shouldn't be a segregated group and I get that we've got all our challenges, but if you surround yourself with people that you trust within the group with a core group of ladies, that share similar challenges you know, you share stories and you overcome those stories.” [P13]

- **Recognition**

Recognition was seen as important factor by participants, especially for doing a good job every day and progressing towards goals. Support in achieving these goals included identifying necessary skills and professional development through mentoring and learning.

“I think recognition is good, so I you know, there's always support in the same sort of oh you've got to a set of goals that you need to achieve. Right. Well, what do you need? What skill sets or

whatever do you need in order to achieve those goals? So, I think there's that component which is more the corporatised and the professional type of grooming, learning, mentoring and all of that... But I think recognition is important because a lot of the way you show up every day and it's nice to know that you're doing a good job.” [P12]

- **Self-Awareness**

Nurturing authentic leadership by fostering self-awareness and understanding diverse perspectives within the business environment was a crucial form of support for women as was expressed by participants. It entailed embracing one's true self while adapting leadership styles to accommodate different viewpoints. The approach could support leaders by equipping them to lead effectively while staying true to themselves.

“So, she can learn more self-awareness. Learn how different people operate in the business and learn again that you don't make excuses for who you are. You embrace who you are, and you will be able to still be yourself, don't compromise on yourself, but you'll be able to lead differently just by understanding how different perspectives get raised from different leaders, different type of people. And you can still be yourself, true to yourself and lead in your capacity, so it was supporting her with more than just saying, you know, leadership position and I think that's what we've got to do a lot more of.” [P9]

- **Progress and opportunities**

There must be more progress and opportunities for women to attain leadership roles.

- **Career progression**

Participants noted that women needed more visibility and equal opportunities to progress compared to their male counterparts. It was noted that career progression should entail internal opportunities as well as external options for growth. It was also important to placing the right women in the right roles.

“I know in Banner B there isn't a woman at that level, in Banner A, there's only two at this stage. Person X is now in an admin and finance role and in Banner C it is actually only Person Y. So yeah, we need to give them visibility. We need to ensure that they get the same airtime, up and coming woman needs to get the same airtime as men and we as women need to advocate and influence our counterparts and in order to make sure that we choose the right woman for the right job.” [P8]

“Because you don't want all the people to feel like hope is gone. Like I did feel at some point last year where I just felt like, ok, I need to look outside for opportunities or my next career progression cause if I have to recall one of my previous companies, one of the senior executives, once came to me and I know when I had to make a decision, I was like, ok, whatever you going to do to make it for yourself, but you must always know wherever you go, your career progression is either upward meaning internally within the company or its outside laterally.”
[P6]

- **Judgement free leadership opportunities**

Another participant raised an important point about having judgment-free leadership opportunities, acknowledging that everyone comes from different circumstances, backgrounds, and support systems. Despite these differences, many faced similar challenges. Hence, allowing individuals to manage their roles and lives without judgment was seen as an important enabler for effective leadership.

“To me it boils down to judgment free leadership opportunities ... So, we all come from different circumstances, right? So, the leader I spoke to you, who told me the trick about balancing. Her mom lives around the corner and cooks for her every day, yet she still struggles. Whereas I don't have anybody. You know, I have to do everything for the household, yet she's still in the same mom guilt position and balancing position as I am in. And so, because everybody's got different circumstances, different family backgrounds, different structures, they need to support financially, emotionally. I think allowing people with judgment free onus on how they manage their portfolios and themselves will be an enabler.” [P11]

- **Mentorship and support systems**

There was a need for added mentorship and support systems.

- **Structured support systems**

Participants argued that there is a need for more structured support for women in leadership, including formal mentorship programmes. While informal mentoring was happening, a more structured system such as dedicated mentorship circles for women would be beneficial. Such mentorship is crucial for enhancing performance and career development.

“I don't think we do enough to pay it forward and we do enough from a structured point of view. I mean, obviously there's nothing stopping me from identifying someone in the team to mentor

and coach, but from an HR led perspective. It does surprise me that we don't have something more concrete for women in leadership...” [P10]

“I think, enhancing performance and career development. I think for me the greatest thing has been mentorship. I think mentorship goes a long way to enhancing your development because I think that we've got a lot of very technically skilled, competent, capable people, but I think mentorship around how to be heard and how to navigate and how to actually be seen.” [P4]

- **Sharing and empowering**

Mentorship from successful women in senior leadership was highlighted as valuable for helping both aspiring and unnoticed female staff develop within the organisation by a participant. This support could benefit other women looking to advance.

“So, I think mentorship, and successful woman like that in senior leadership positions being able to share some of those learnings with younger, female staff or female staff who've got aspirations to develop further into the organisation or even those who have no aspiration, who just sit very quietly in the corner and carry on and just do what they need to do and almost go unnoticed.” [P12]

- **Training**

A participant noted that training can be beneficial, inclusive of on-the-job assignments for effective skill development.

“Training, sometimes external training is required, but also stretch assignments on the job training is sometimes better because in order for you like I'm a big believer, that stretch assignments and like putting yourself out there and picking up stuff that's not necessarily in your day to day is invaluable in order to gain the necessary skills in order to move into the next role.” [P7]

- **Leadership and executive support**

Support from leadership along with resources was naturally seen as mandatory by participants. Participants were of the opinion that leadership must set the tone in terms of influencing an organisation, particularly regarding gender representation in senior roles. Hence, having male leaders advocating for change can facilitate progress. However, they noted, this must be coupled with relevant action to promote women into high-level positions, such as CEO or CFO.

“But I do think it's important that tone at the top shapes a lot for an organisation. And I think if we have and we currently do still have a male leader, right? Even though Female Leader P is our managing partner, we have a male COO, who is currently overseeing things. And I think if he is vocal about making those changes, things should filter down hopefully. But there needs to be that support and there needs to be deliberate action showing that we're going to put a female in a role like CEO or like CFO, because that's important I think there needs to be more positive action from male execs to actually help drive women forward within their roles.” [P1]

- **Culture**

Support is dependent on organisational culture. There was consensus by participants that a supportive culture should be created. Culture should be informed by the following:

- **Collective responsibility**

Collective responsibility is needed. Participants were of the view that at an executive level, egos and politics are dominant where individuals have personal interests rather than focusing on organisational needs. This attitude hinders progress, both in terms of the organisational goals and individual growth. There is a tendency to defer responsibility with many expecting others, to drive initiatives instead of taking a collective responsibility.

“You need a team strong team. And that's the only support I think that we need. I think it's easier if I look at today, there's a lot of egos involved. There's a lot of politics involved, at an Exec level and the reason for that it's because the people are serving themselves versus the organisation. If you are self-serving and that's all about me and what I want, the organisation will not do what the organisation needs to do.” [P8]

“We're not going to move forward from an organisational perspective in driving, you know, from whether it's our financial KPA or strategy or personally, individuals from a growth perspective, we continuously think it's someone else's job to do. We think it's HR. We think it's you and I. We think it's a woman. We're always looking for somebody else to do it. Nobody wants to show up every single day.” [P3]

- **HR support and culture creation**

Fostering a supportive culture through HR is crucial. Participants indicated that there was a need for clearer HR support for leaders, due to team maturity varying across the

organisation. Some professionals may have more maturity while others may not understand flexible policies. there needs to be a unified culture driven by HR.

“If I could ask for one thing, I think that would be it is more clear HR support for these types of things as leaders because our teams may not be mature enough to understand it. I think I gave the example of compliance, finance and legal, those associates tend to be mature because they come from professional and speciality qualifications... I know it doesn't come easy cause again it's talking about people's maturity levels and having that want to say that that cultural support is so imperative, it's so imperative for enabling us to do what we need to do to get things right.”
[P11]

- **Balance and flexibility**

There must be more flexibility offered to women in order to keep/maintain balance in workplace and in their roles.

- **Flexible working**

Providing flexibility was seen viewed as a key factor by participants in fostering engagement and commitment among women. Flexibility in work arrangements was beneficial allowing employees to adapt their schedules to enhance productivity. This approach helps create a supportive environment where women can thrive, as they are trusted to manage their time rather than adhering to rigid hours.

“What we do well as the organisation is I think the flexi and it's almost; I take it as an initiative by management to say we are allowing you to flex normal work career rules to enable you to be better at what you do. If we are more stringent, it might not suit you. And then we're not getting. So, I think the flexibility, is really good.” [P11]

“Give me flexibility and I will give you 200% and not 100%, but any case yes.” [P8]

- **Work-life balance**

Creating a safe space in the workplace is crucial for women to discuss their need for work-life balance and flexibility without guilt, as their family roles differ from those of men. Participants noted that it was important to understand the challenges of balancing work and home life for women. Female leaders could enhance productivity due to shared experiences with family responsibilities.

“I think there would be a lot more understanding of a home life of what it takes to being a senior leader and to balance both. I mean, I'm talking from my experience that it's easier for me to work a straight 8:00 to 4:00. Do what I need to do?” [P10]

“So, I think having more female leaders will encourage you actually end up having better productivity. Because that flexibility in that sense of, you know, I've got to do this for my kids, you know, I found that I had way better relationships with my leaders who are mums and who had an understanding of what it was to be having a full-time job and managing kids.” [P10]

“I think two is just creating a safe space for them to actually be like, it's ok to have a work life balance. They have a family to take care of and yes, lots of males and females balance out their responsibilities. But on the whole, women are women and the role they play in in a family is different to a male, and so I think for me, creating that safe space for them.” [P3]

4.4.3.2 Sub-Theme 2: Promoting more women into leadership positions

This primary sub-theme determined the key factors necessary for promoting more women into leadership positions.

- **Culture**

Organisational culture ranked highly yet again. This was informed by the following:

- **Fairness and transparency**

Understanding the fairness of these processes is crucial for fostering trust among team members. Participants express the view that women should be given fair opportunities during recruitment processes, such as ensuring that a balanced number of male and female candidates are considered in final interviews, to enhance their chances of growth and progress.

“And that lack of transparency and visibility around the way things happen, even the last lot of appointments. Did anyone take the time to tell us how that resulted? You know, because that was important as well. Nowhere did anyone tell us that it was a fair, I'm not saying it wasn't. I have no idea how they were appointed, but nobody's taking the time to tell us what the processes were to arrive at these appointments, ... But there's that constant lack of visibility and transparency in the organisation. So, we actually don't know.” [P2]

“I think to just ensure that, as I say that they interview them. So, I know there was an example of the previous HR executive for the organisation, and I think it was she who once said, and it

really resonated with me where she said women are never going to get ahead if they're not given the chance. So, she wanted to even introduce a measure that says if you are interviewing for a position, you need to ensure like if there's six finalists that at least three are women and three are men. And so that at least the women get the chance in that final interview to get the opportunity.” [P5]

- **Stereotype and complex breaking**

Participants expressed the view that there must be elimination of stereotyping and other related complexes. They argued that the CEO role can be held by individuals of any gender, and several capable female leaders exist in various fields. However, some participants noted that other culture challenges also exist including a superiority complex and a lack of cohesion. Therefore, women in leadership should actively support other women to address these issues and avoid marginalisation

“The CEO doesn't need to be a male. The CEO can be anyone. So, you know, we've got a female tech leader, we've got a female ecommerce, or we've got business development or whatever it is or business growth. You know, we've got females in those environments.” [P12]

“I think for me this goes back to the culture and values that I think we have. In this organisation we have a cultural problem. You know, we have individuals that have a superiority complex. We don't have a one organisation way of thinking, and this doesn't just come, I'm not just referring to from a work perspective organisation. This is about how we think...It brings it back to that. So, I think that's a challenge. I think women that are in leadership positions need to learn to take other females along with them. I don't think that happens. Don't marginalized people. It's just a whole culture thing.” [P3]

- **Role modelling**

Participants indicated that the organisation has demonstrated that a female CEO can successfully lead, which serves as a role model and helps create the impression that leadership does not have to be male dominated. This strategic placement of female leaders contributes as motivation to other women and a more inclusive environment.

“I think we're doing it already, because you know we've shown that the art of possible does exist. We've put a female CEO in one of our banners. So, I think just by default by us having strategically placed these role models and you know scattered across our organisation I think is already creating the impression that this doesn't have to be a male dominated environment.” [P12]

- **Succession planning**

Effective succession planning was another highly ranked factor by participants. This was a logical argument given the current lack of succession planning.

- **Mapping and trajectory**

Participants expressed their view that succession planning and career trajectories should be clearly mapped out from the beginning of the employee journey within the organisation. They noted that this is important for helping women understand how to advance into higher roles. In addition, there must be more transparency in the appointment processes to prevent uncertainty about how decisions are made and career pathing.

“And that trajectory needs to be clear so that everyone has, or everyone is working towards that and helping that young woman grow within that space. And I think if it's putting them on a program, putting them on a training, a shadowing assignment, whatever it may be, but if you don't have that clear plan. I don't think you're ever going to get women into those roles.” [P1]

“The whole development and career management it's not very transparent and I wouldn't say it's for females or males, it's just not transparent. How often is an appointment made and you sit wondering how? Why? And if it was transparent, we wouldn't be left asking those questions. So yeah, we need a lot more transparency coming in and we need to understand these career paths and because we don't, it's kind of like organically kind of happens.” [P2]

- **Pipeline focus**

Participants indicated that there is a need to adopt a long-term view in succession planning, specifically focusing on recruiting and preparing women for future leadership roles. This involves identifying potential candidates within the organisation and creating a succession pipeline to ensure women are prepared for upcoming positions.

“..., how do we actively recruit and have an intentional sort of you know objective that there is going to be a sort of a path that gets created around a long-term view. It can't just be a short-term view... because if we're looking at sort of a 5 to 10 year view, have we identified women already in the organisation or are we looking at particularly roles that we know are going to become available where people are retiring over the next five years. And have we stated an intent that we are grooming women into those positions, you know, so are we building a succession pipeline adequately.” [P9]

“I think we need to have succession planning in place that empowers women in order to meet those senior roles. And I think the focus needs to be on the pipeline essentially.” [P7]

- **Proactive communication**

Participants were of the opinion that currently, succession planning lacks proactive communication and candidates are not informed about their potential as successors or provided with guidance for their development. Furthermore, it is unclear of how demographic factors influence the selection of successors or if used to support their growth.

“I hate to say it, but again HR right, so having that clarity of expectation for succession. What exactly does a candidate need? Like we just went through this big STR process, but unless I told my line manager, I want to be successful or something, nobody's come back to me to say, hey, you've been identified as successor for this. Would you be keen on that? Let's start moulding you for that. Those discussions don't happen.” [P11]

- **Skills development and training**

Skills development and training must never be underestimated and should become a key component to promoting women into leadership.

- **Soft skills**

Participants expressed the view that soft skills are equally important alongside technical competencies in senior leadership roles. There was a lack of such skills in leadership and concerns were raised about the availability of opportunities for developing these skills. Prioritising soft skills development was important for cultivating effective leaders.

“I think in senior leadership roles, you generally have the ability to do the technical competencies to do the job right. Or alternatively, you're going to build a team with people who can do all that and everything that needs to happen in senior leadership, you need to be focusing on, for example, the strategy, building a team, building stakeholder engagement and only a small portion is actually doing the job. Without having the soft skills, you're not going to be able to manage a team, and you're going to struggle at building stakeholder engagements.” [P7]

“It's not just about promoting like because we can promote and promote. But if the person is not ready and don't have the skills right, the one thing that I can say needs to be done that I

have done externally or I could suggest do that, is more the soft skills right? I don't believe we have all equal opportunities for soft skills.” [P6]

- **Review talent management framework**

The current talent management framework was criticised by the participants for overstressing the 'high potential' (hypo) status as a requirement for promotion. Such hypo candidates can be not correctly identified. In addition, the participants expressed the view that the framework creates a perception that promotions are tied solely to 'hypo status' and may neglect other roles and experts who can also advance. There is a need to revise the framework.

“Why do you need to be a high potential to be promoted. Do you know if you really look at hypos, they should be like 0.05% of our population and they needed for specific things. Promoting from hypos or this hypo pool does not work ... You are actually identifying them incorrectly, but we should be repositioning this whole talent management framework because everybody wants to be a hypo because the perception is you are promoted from being a hypo, even though they say you can be a valued contributor, subject matter expert and you still can be promoted...” [P2]

- **Targeted development programmes**

Programmes such as ILDP and management initiatives should prioritise females within the organisation. Once enrolled in such programmes, participants should be placed on a distinct career trajectory and be earmarked for future leadership roles.

“I think programs like your ILDP, your management programs, all of that. I think first prize should be to females in the organisation and I think the minute you're on that program you should be put on a different trajectory within your career, and you should be earmarked for future roles.” [P1]

- **Visibility of opportunities**

Relating to the above, a participant noted that there is a lack of visibility on local and global opportunities, with decisions often made before employees can express interest. Hence a better understanding and visibility of the full talent pool is needed and not just hypo candidates

“And we just don't have visibility on what the opportunities are locally and globally to even put hands up for those things, because before we know it, an appointment has been made. We are

left wondering how and we feel we've got the skills and competencies or the potential, and so we really need to understand our talent pool, not just the hypo pool. And when opportunities come about, we really need to understand where our talent are, what's the development areas that they still need to go through and what's associated plans with them to be 100% successful in these roles.” [P2]

- **Merit and quality driven**

The promotion process should be merit and quality driven.

- **Merit and quality-based promotion**

Participants were of the opinion that the selection criteria should focus on merit and achieving the desired outcomes. They felt that people must be chosen carefully ensuring they have the capability to succeed and that leadership appointments should prioritise individuals with the skills and vision to move the organisation forward, irrespective of gender. In addition, they noted that promoting too many women without the right support can lead to failures, reinforcing the need for proper development and timing.

“What's important to me is the type of leader we put in, no matter who it is, it needs to be leaders who have the acumen to lead us forward. It must be leaders who want us, as the people who build this place, to succeed and own it in the future and give us opportunities, no matter who that is. I think that's what we need rather.” [P11]

“In some cases where we have had woman, not necessarily ready for an executive role, we have set those women up for failure and we need to take the responsibility... We need to have the right woman with the right experience and the right job where we have overpromoted woman, they have failed because we haven't provided them with the right structures in order to succeed because they were overpromoted they probably didn't have the confidence to put their hand up and ask for help.” [P8]

“You've got women that are just so not the right people to be there. Then you've got woman. So, having the right female for me is important. I could sit here and say just having woman in the workplace is important but having that right level of individual is important. And yes, woman automatically bring a level of authenticity, generally.” [P3]

- **Mentorship and support**

Mentorship and related support became a recurring theme and seen valuable in the promotion of women into leadership.

- **Women supporting women**

The participants expressed the view that there is a need for women to foster a culture of encouragement and support the development of future female leaders. It was noted that women often faced challenges related to lack of mutual support from other women. Instead of uplifting one another, there can be instances of criticism, gossip and undermining. This can hinder collective growth. Addressing this issue is essential for creating a more inclusive and supportive environment that promotes the progress of women.

“I think it's often been said that women need to be cheerleaders for other woman and not, you know, not be the ones that drive them down and are negative about things. And it's about uplifting one another. And I think if we do that more as females, we help get the next generation to where they need to be and from a male perspective, honestly, I think it is great to have a sponsor and stuff, but I do sometimes feel like men don't necessarily understand.” [P1]

“And then I think women need to support each other more, I think that actually woman are harsher on each other than they are on their male counterparts.” [P4]

“We still don't have women supporting other people to grow, too much of backbiting, still gossiping and I mean, there's just so many things we can talk. We have a fundamental cultural issue in our organisation and then it makes it even harder for females because we actually are not deliberate and intentional about growing females.” [P3]

- **Placing value on females**

Participants noted that encouraging open discussions and mentorship allows women to realise their value. It's also important to value women for their skills rather than appearances, acknowledging that objectification still exists in the workplace.

“So, I think by showcasing our talent and by recognizing and putting females and considering females in senior positions, I think we've shown the rest of the retail business as well as our staff members that it's possible and I think actively subscribing to a mentorship ethos or you know, openly encouraging discussions, openly seeking opinions of everyone you know.” [P12]

“And so, the more to make them feel valued, for who they are, not for what they look like or what their appearance is, you know. That they not this female object. I may not have personally experienced much of that, but I think, we shouldn't be oblivious to the fact that is there...” [P3]

- **Mentorship formalisation**

Participants expressed the view that mentorship should involve formalised conversations and structured follow-up to ensure effectiveness. Informal interactions may not yield the same results. However, it can significantly impact development when formalised and properly managed.

“Same with mentorship, right? If you have a conversation informally with someone, unless you have made it a little bit more formal, she has to come back and you know, there's certain things she has to do. I bring something. It makes a difference. That's something I have also realized. Think if it's formalized, it can work if run in the correct way.” [P3]

4.4.4. Main theme 4: Benefits of women in leadership for the organisation

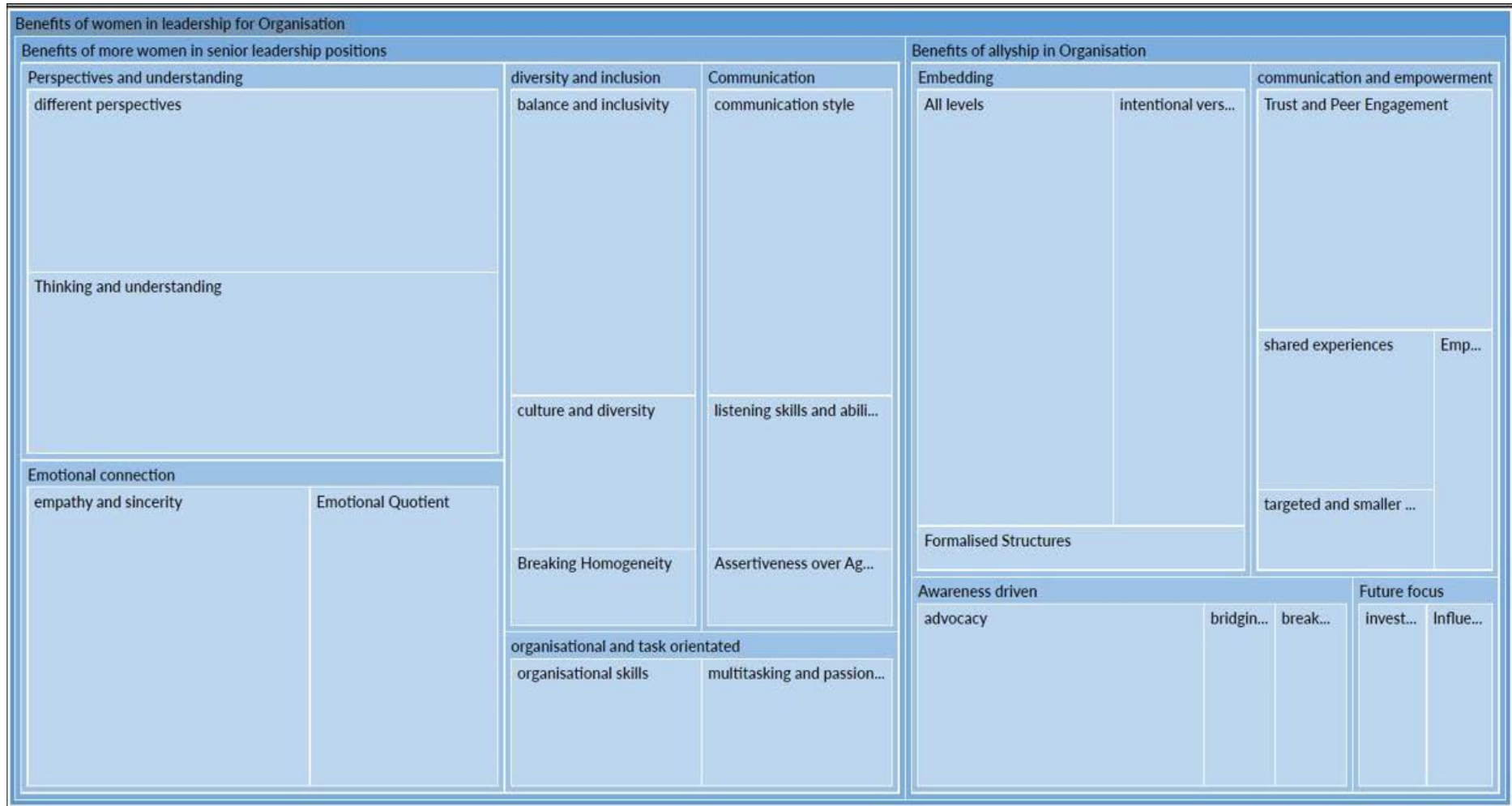


Figure 4-16: Benefits of women in leadership for the organisation

This primary theme as reflected in Figure 4-16 hierarchy chart, examined the organisational benefits of having more women in leadership positions.

4.4.4.1 Sub-theme 1: Benefits of more women in senior leadership positions

There were numerous benefits that could be realised from having more women in senior leadership positions. This was informed by the following.

- **Different perspectives, thinking and understanding**

Women could bring a new/different perspective and understanding abilities to the table.

Participants were of the opinion that women bring diverse perspectives, ideas, and dynamics to leadership and decision-making processes. Their different thought processes help to introduce innovative approaches. Women's contributions often emphasize the people side of decisions and involve more careful consideration before acting, which adds balance to leadership teams.

“I think women bring a different voice to the table and a different perspective and I'm not saying that we only need women to run the world like you really do want that balance between those different experiences and what they bring.” [P7]

“I think that when you have a highly homogeneous leadership team, you land up with group think and you land up not finding different innovative ways of doing things. Because they're all looking at it from the same perspective and thinking the same way. And I think, woman, bring a different dynamic to the table.” [P4]

Participants expressed their view that similarly, women can bring distinct ways of thinking, and their methodical approach can add value to decision-making processes. Women also play a crucial role in understanding customer needs, especially in retail, where they often make key purchase related decisions. Hence, this can guide businesses in aligning with female consumers' preferences.

“We are very methodical in terms of what we're doing, and I think an organisation benefits from both kinds of thinking, which is why I think having a female at that level, to voice her opinions brings such a different landscape.” [P1]

“I won't never forget being told that in some supermarkets they strategically separate men and women cause most of the buying decisions are made by the woman in the world. And if you think about it, who buys everything in your house? So, understanding what a female wants in retail is incredibly important.”

So, from a customer perspective, it is very important that we have woman to be able to guide the business on what women actually are looking for because most of them are going to be the ones that are buying.”
[P7]

- **Emotional connection**

Women can also bring much needed emotional connect to the organisation. Participants were of the opinion that women are seen to bring empathy, emotional intelligence and care for employees. These traits allow them to manage emotions effectively and create a supportive environment where employees feel valued thereby fostering deeper connections with people. They are seen to have compassionate and nurturing instincts which can also contribute to employee health and wellness.

“I think that the one thing that most women encompass is a deep care for their employees. I think that they are a little bit more empathetic, sympathetic, and I think that they spend more time making people feel valued, because of their deep care and as a result you get more out of your employees.” [P13]

“At the same time having that almost like caring and motherly instincts that come through is also good for an organisation because you can use those to the benefit of hold on, what are our employees needs that can benefit from a health and wellness perspective?” [P7]

The presence of women in the workplace was seen as beneficial for promoting emotional balance and connection by participants. Those who advanced through the ranks often displayed sincerity, humility, and a willingness to connect, contributing to a higher emotional quotient (EQ) in the workplace.

“So, I think emotional maturity is one positive thing and I think the ability to multitask. So, you can do your kids homework, answer a work WhatsApp, look at your email and probably are planning tomorrow night's dinner, roughly all at the same time. Whereas I think men's ability, I mean, because they haven't had to operate at that level in the past.” [P12]

“Woman that have come through the ranks almost, you'll see a lot more sincerity and humility and willingness to connect a little more and I think they bring the EQ. A bit more generally compared to men.” [P3]

- **Diversity and inclusion**

Women would also add value from a diversity and inclusion perspective. Women were seen to bring balance and inclusivity to leadership roles, especially in a male-dominated environment by participants. Hence, their presence was valued for fostering inclusivity, not

only through gender but across diverse cultures. They were also seen to navigate difficult situations with a softer approach and manage responsibilities with more structure.

“I think woman have to offer more balance, integration, inclusivity because we know what it feels like to not be part of the chosen few.” [P8]

“And very fair, you know, cause you think about how women have to balance a family and manage everything in a structured way. And I think those are the elements that a woman brings into a leadership position, you bring calm actually often because generally there's a lot of testosterone around in the room and men are always, you know, and I think women bring calm to that environment.” [P9]

Participants noted that women could promote diversity by bringing together individuals with varied perspectives and ideas and learn from one another to develop more comprehensive solutions.

“And more diversity to the organisation and out of that generally comes innovation, you know, and doing things differently, leads to innovation and new ways of doing things, thinking and all of that sort of stuff.” [P2]

“If you bring them all together, you can really learn so much from each other, but also the diversity of ideas can really solve problems, and we're not just like one focus on how to solve a problem because there's so many different ways to do it, and I think that's why we need more diversity and inclusion.” [P7]

Incorporating women's voices in decision-making processes was believed to reduce homogeneous thinking, leading to more diverse and well-rounded solutions.

“And I think that hearing the voices of women around the table will dilute some of that homogeneous thinking and potentially bring different, better, thought through solutions to the organisation. I think that any sort of homogeneity around a table runs the risk of making decisions that are not well rounded and thought through.” [P4]

- **Communication style**

Women were seen to facilitate effective communication. Male leaders were often seen by participants as more abrupt or rude, especially in stressful situations, which could hinder productive communication. Women naturally adopted a softer tone, enabling them to express seriousness without being harsh, fostering a more supportive environment for open dialogue. Hence women were seen to communicate more effectively by finding common ground and balancing personal and professional discussions.

“And I just think it's we are able to communicate differently, there's a lot more areas that are common or that we can find common ground on, you know, talk to them about children, school. You know and as well as have a corporate or professional conversation. I find the men's situation is a little harder. We still get there eventually in the end, but there's a lot more probing questions or a lot more effort has to go into the communication in order to get to that level of familiarity.” [P12]

“I haven't seen the difference other than what I find but also where there are females and male leaders, males are normally rude right for lack of a better example like when they stress urgency, they don't know how there's a way of speaking we know we all get frustrated but it's how you speak not necessarily, what you speak and how you speak it is important already if someone is in trouble or they miss a deadline or they need to deliver on something that's very urgent, they are already terrified.” [P6]

- **Organisational skills**

Women were also seen as meticulous in organisation skills and task management. Women were seen to be more organised and deadline-driven compared to men, who may approach goals in a less structured manner. Women also were seen to have more awareness and attention to detail that were attributed to their methodical nature and possibly linked to their maternal instincts.

“I also think that as females we are a lot more deadline driven and a lot more organised in terms of what we do. And I think whereas men know that's the end goal and they just pick a way to get to it and then just hopscotch from one to the other.” [P1]

“There's a greater level of awareness and whether it's the maternal instinct, you know, from that perspective, I think women are very detailed and methodical.” [P9]

Women were seen to have strong multi-tasking capabilities to be able to simultaneously handle multiple responsibilities. They were seen to work harder based on their passion and drive.

“So, I think women have a natural ability to multitask. And you're able to do more than one thing at the same time.” [P12]

“And woman just work harder. It appears, they are in the detail they are passionate.” [P3]

4.4.4.2 Sub-theme 2: Benefits of allyship in organisation

This sub-theme outlined the benefits of allyship between men and women in the organisation to promote women in leadership.

- **Communication and empowerment**

Allyship could promote better communication and empowerment.

- **Trust and Peer Engagement**

Participants were of an opinion that leaders could foster trust and encourage more honest dialogue by blending in with all staff rather than emphasising their seniority, allowing for more open conversations and insights from employees. There were potential current cultural barriers in the organisation that created a fear of speaking up among employees, thereby limiting open communication.

“It's awkward, it's because of our culture. The culture needs to be sorted out. People won't speak up. They'll be too afraid to speak up, they are afraid to speak up...There's generally a fear of speaking up in the organisation and saying what's really on your mind. Even though they invite you to do so with listening sessions and all of that sort of stuff. People are afraid of speaking up.” [P2]

“I think so often things get lost in translation because we are coming from different frames of reference and different perspectives. And when you assume somebody thinks the same as you or has the same lived experience as you. You miss the nuances of what's actually happening, and then you misinterpret different things.” [P4]

- **Shared experiences**

Participants felt that sharing of experiences was crucial and the Women's Leadership Council was a support tool in this regard. It was noted that the council had been in place for over a decade, but senior leadership's buy-in was deemed essential for it to be viewed as valuable and to drive meaningful action.

“Yeah, 100% because I think everything that I struggle with that I would assume my colleague sitting next to me, or on another floor would struggle with the same with the same thing. And so, I definitely think it's beneficial, I think the Woman Leadership Council or that mechanism is a tool that we could use to foster or get it off the ground more. But I mean, I think you know this, the Woman's Council was established a long time ago and I'm thinking that like 10 years plus and I think the concept, or something could even be longer and because I know I've been attending the sessions for many years.” [P12]

“Because I think, as I said, what I'm experiencing, let me tell you, is not unique to me. Everybody's going to feel exactly the same way, but I think you do need buy in from the senior

people partner to actively think that that is valuable, and value add and it's going to take action.” [P12]

- **Targeted and smaller groups**

Participants indicated that allyship initiatives could be more impactful if conducted in targeted, smaller groups, allowing peers at similar levels to engage and understand their influence on each other.

“Or maybe targeted. I don't know how intentional we are about it, right? For example, the diversity and inclusions and all those things that happen at the business, it's as if we're doing it for a tick box, right, they are not effective or they're effective to the small minority that sits there and actually listen and hear what this has been. But if that's done in a more targeted or smaller groups or small impact, or even at certain levels get peers at that level together and take them on or do those diversity and all those inclusion type of activities, so that they can realize what they have that impact on their peers.” [P6]

- **Empowerment**

Participants indicated that more empowerment initiatives can be done through allyship, encouraging both women and men to identify and empower other female colleagues in meetings to speak up and build their confidence. For example, the Red Shoe Movement was established to promote the need for women in leadership and empower colleagues to support this goal.

“And I think in the organisation we've kind of done that with the Red Shoe movement, where it's to drive the fact that we do need women in leadership. And what does that perhaps look like and how can we empower our colleagues to do it? It's also when you're in a meeting and whether you're a female or a male and you see, hold on, there's a female that's maybe not willing to speak up at this stage because maybe they haven't had the confidence. How do you empower them to talk?” [P7]

- **Awareness driven**

Allyship can foster more awareness in the following ways.

- **Advocacy**

Participants noted that there is a need for advocacy and support for women in leadership roles to help them navigate daily challenges and build networks. While

women may be placed in leadership positions, ongoing support is crucial for their development and confidence. In addition, men should act as advocates for women by raising awareness of the challenge's women face and identifying areas where they need support. For example, during meetings, it's important to have someone who actively encourages female participation by asking for their opinions.

“You know, you still go to find those daily challenges, so this is where you need someone to advocate for you to help you in terms of building the networks a lot better. Supporting how do you influence different? You know, male leaders in the business and this is where we need the, once you in the role support until you're comfortable and you have the confidence to lead in that role. And I think that's the portion that I find lacking is we put you in a role and then what do we do, you know, and I've seen this personally...” [P9].

“And it wasn't just females in the room, it was a lot of males. His intention was, how do we find males to advocate for other women? But firstly, by creating an awareness, you know what are the challenge? What do you need help with? What do you need support with? So even in the meeting you have someone who sits there and advocates and where they will say, what is your opinion, you know.” [P9]

- **Break stereotypes**

The view expressed was that there was a stereotype that men often apply for positions even without meeting all the criteria, while women tend to hesitate due to perceived shortcomings. The focus off allyship should also be on changing this mindset, thereby encouraging women to apply for roles even if they felt that they did not fulfil every requirement.

“And it's again also stereotypical that we say like, men sometimes, and it's a very generalized statement, but men sometimes will apply for roles where they don't necessarily have all the criteria, but females look at it and say, should I be applying because I don't have all the criteria and it's changing that thinking actually to say no, let me give it a go and see what happens.” [P7]

- **Bridging education gaps**

Participants indicated that there was a need for educational systems to equip future professionals with tools for work-life balance and burnout prevention, rather than solely focusing on technical skills. Currently there was an absence of such teachings in academic curricula.

“So, it goes beyond, I want to say just an organisational concept to me, you know, it goes to academics. We teach these professional qualifications. We teach people how to do the technical, but are we enabling the future generations with these types of tools to say how do you balance it? How do you prevent burnout? How do you still keep yourself sane? I think you know it goes back to we often see these memes, why don't they teach you how to do taxes in school? Why don't they teach you how to change a tyre in school? You know, so why don't they teach accountants to prevent burnout?” [P11]

- **Embedding**

Allyship should be embedded across the organisation for it to be effective. This can be done in the following ways.

- **All levels**

There was a need for support and networking opportunities starting at the grassroots level expressed by the participants. The challenges faced by women are not only limited to high-potential individuals. Therefore, encouraging allyship is crucial for advocacy and support for women, particularly at lower organisational levels, where disparities are most significant. This can also create a more inclusive environment, encouraging participation regardless of titles or hierarchy.

“My worry is sometimes the woman feel they have to compromise who they are to get somewhere in the business. And it's not just at a leadership level that we need to create the network in the support, you've got to start at the grassroot levels... but I think the bigger battle in challenge needs to happen at a lower level in the organisation.” [P9]

“You've got to call the woman out but more importantly, you got to get the males onto your page to say, how do you advocate more for women? How do you want more for women? So yeah, while I can sit here and complain about a lot of what we deal with it head office, I think it's nothing compared to what they have to deal with that to store level. So, and yeah, and I think we need to really start solving for that level in the organisation because I think that's where the disparity is huge.” [P9]

- **Intentional versus tick-box**

Participants expressed the view that it must be based on genuine willingness to understand women perspectives. Hence, senior leadership's recognition of the value of allyship is essential, and efforts should be made to ensure these initiatives are not

just tick-box exercises, but meaningful engagements that require time and commitment.

“It can't be, now we have to make the women feel included. So, let's go do pottery, rather than shoot things. It has to be an actual willingness to engage and to seek first to understand and then and I think that open communication is so important to actually fully understanding another person's perspective.” [P4]

“There needs to be an intentionality with the goal of a better outcome to be there, not just to pay lip service. I think senior leadership has to believe that there is value from hearing the alternate voices.” [P4]

“It's got to be done like that, and you've got to make time for it. It's got to be a working thing. It shouldn't be a tick the box. So yeah, I think it can work.” [P3]

- **Formalised structures**

Relating to the above, participants indicated that establishing formal structures to support this initiative is essential, but it should be driven by business leaders to ensure its effectiveness and relevance.

“I think the more you create some kind of formalised structures you know similar to, but it can't be done by HR. It's got to be done by business leaders and people. I think for me, for this to work. So yes, it can work, I think. Yes, it's a good idea. I do feel; however, it can't be a HR driven project.” [P3]

- **Future focus**

There should also be a future focus on allyship.

- **Investment**

Participants are of the opinion that having support and investment from a senior executive who believes in one's potential can significantly motivate individuals to work harder and strive for leadership roles, such as becoming the next CEO.

“Because then we want to work that much harder to get there because we know there's someone who's believing in us, and especially if it's somebody in a senior executive role who's now saying I'm invested in you, and I want to make sure that you're going to be the next CEO then you're that much more incentivized to give the best of yourself.” [P1]

- **Influencing future generations**

It was noted by participants that gender roles were evolving generationally. This could bring positive change in the mindset of future generations, especially younger males.

“So, to me, it goes almost down, I think generationally over time it hopefully, it'll change. Again, big distinction between generation before us versus now and hopefully with us versus how we groom our sons, you know, to do things, how they see their fathers' manifest things in the house compared to us will set the tone” [P11].

4.5. Summary

This chapter highlighted the challenges that women in senior leadership experienced in a retail organisation in South Africa. The views from the women in senior leadership that participated in the research study focused on their current realities, the challenges and barriers that experienced, challenges with support and promotion. The chapter also highlighted the benefits that women in leadership bring to the organisation. The next chapter will discuss the results of the research and in comparison, with previous research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter presented the results of the research study on examining the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa, from the data collected. This chapter discusses the results of the study in relation to literature from previous studies and with consideration to the research objectives of the study which are reiterated below to provide perspective on the findings:

- To identify the challenges that women in senior leadership experience in executing their roles and responsibilities in a retail organisation in South Africa.
- To examine the support measures that women in senior leadership require from a retail organisation in South Africa to enhance their performance and career development.
- To provide recommendations to the retail organisation in South Africa on the benefits of having more women in senior leadership positions and how the retail organisation can mitigate the challenges identified in the study.

The key findings of the research study are summarised in the Table 5-1 below with consideration to the themes identified in Chapter Four and are discussed in greater detail in this Chapter:

Table 5-1: Themes and summary of discussion of results

Themes	Sub-themes	Summary of discussion of results
Current Realities	Current roles and responsibilities as a leader	Some of the participants expressed that women were appointed to senior leadership positions mostly in support type roles and not in strategic and performance critical roles which are seen as token appointments to create the perception that the organisation supports diversity, equity and inclusion.
	Support adequacy and representation	The retail organisation has made progress to increase female representation in leadership roles, but progress was seen to be slow with the view that the organisation was white male dominated.
	Views, decisions and actions received by others in the organisation	Many participants felt that their ideas, suggestions and voices were not heard at the retail organisations head office but within their respective functions and banners, their views, voices and ideas were more respected. Some participants have said that their opinions were often challenged.

Themes	Sub-themes	Summary of discussion of results
Challenges and Barriers	Barriers restricting women into senior leadership positions	Many participants expressed the view that women have been overlooked for promotions, excluded from important decision-making processes, or subjected to negative and harsh comments and behaviours.
	Challenges experienced by women as leaders	Gender bias and stereotyping was still prevalent in the organisation and some female leaders contributed to these behaviour patterns by excluding or being overly critical of other female leaders. Some female leaders experienced low self-esteem and low confidence to take on more senior roles for fear of failure.
	Challenges in balancing career and personal life	Some participants expressed that the demands of senior roles negatively affected their work-life balance. Some felt guilty for making time for family and expressed that they had to overcompensate at work when taking care of family obligations.
	Navigation of challenges	Participants expressed that to navigate the challenges they experienced, they needed the intentional support and commitment from the organisation to increase the representation of women in leadership and the career advancement of women. They felt that women empowerment work groups needed to be more deliberate about mentoring, supporting and being inclusive of all women.
Support and Promotion	Support needed by female leaders to enhance performance and career development	Female leaders shared that they needed support in the form of formalised mentorship, advocacy and allyship from male and female leaders as well as executive leadership training and development.
	Promoting more women into Leadership positions	Participants felt that the organisation's succession planning processes were inadequate to create a pipeline for future female leaders to advance in their careers.
Benefits of Women in Leadership for the Organisation	Benefits of more women in senior leadership positions	Participants felt that having more women in leadership could bring the retail organisation the benefit of having diverse viewpoints, increased creativity and innovation.
	Benefits of allyship in organisations	Women in leadership positions expressed the view that fostering allyship in the organisation could benefit the organisation by challenging gender bias, amplifying women's voices and creating a more inclusive work environment.

5.2. Organisational culture challenges

The results from the research study suggests that while the retail organisation has made progress to address the representation of women in senior leadership, progress has been slow, and the organisation is still deeply entrenched in a patriarchal and white male dominated organisational culture. A study by the World Economic Forum (2024) also supports these results. The culture manifests in various ways, which is described in the paragraphs that follow.

5.3. Gendered power dynamics

The feedback received indicates that women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions and face subtle and overt forms of discrimination and exclusion. Many participants confirmed that women have been overlooked for promotions, excluded from important decision-making processes, or subjected to negative and harsh comments and behaviours. Many participants said that they had to work hard to prove their competence and build rapport with stakeholders for contributions to be taken seriously or valued. This was aligned to the previous study that affirmed that the shared behaviours and attitudes of the people within an organisation are reflective of the organisation's culture (Nehemia and Lenkoe, 2023). Jali, Suknunan, and Bhana (2021) supports the view that patriarchal culture still dominates South Africa and can impact the culture and behaviour of the organisation towards women.

5.4. Tokenism

Feedback from some of the participants were that women were appointed to senior leadership positions mostly in support type roles and not in strategic and performance critical roles which are seen as token appointments to create the perception that the organisation supports diversity, equity and inclusion instead of appreciating and valuing the contribution they can bring based on their qualifications and experience. This has led to feelings of frustration, disappointment and isolation. Many have confirmed that they have felt that their ideas, suggestions and voices are not heard at the retail organisations head office but within their respective functions and banners, their views, voices and ideas were more respected. Some participants have said that their opinions were often challenged. Requests were often made to a male leader to validate the same information that they had shared. Some participants felt that their positions were not respected. Zimmer (1988) affirmed the impact that tokenism can have on women in senior leadership, where they are left feeling frustrated and isolated because their positions are seen to satisfy legislative requirements, and they are not valued and their views not respected.

5.5. Microaggressions

The response received from the participants show that many women have experienced microaggressions, such as being interrupted, talked over, or dismissed. These subtle forms of discrimination can have a significant impact on women's mental and emotional health and lead to low self-confidence and self-esteem. This type of behaviour was not solely exhibited from men in the organisation, but it was highlighted that some female leaders were also prone to exhibiting this behaviour pattern. This type of behaviour towards women is reflective of the patriarchal society that still exists (Jali et al., 2021).

5.6. Challenges with ineffective diversity and inclusion initiatives

The organisation's diversity and inclusion initiatives appear to be ineffective in addressing the challenges faced by women in senior leadership positions. These initiatives often lack strategic focus and meaningful impact. The feedback received highlighted that this practice seemed to be driven more by the human resources department than by the executive committee of the organisation. Participants mentioned that after the prior vice-president for diversity, equity and inclusion left the organisation, the influence and visibility of this role and function has somewhat lessened. For diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives to be taken seriously, it is important that leadership sets the tone across the organisation. Studies show that leaders in the organisation need to motivate and foster an environment of diversity, equity and inclusion for the initiatives to be effective (Barnes et al., 2024).

5.7. Lack of formalised mentorship

The results revealed that while there are programs like the Red Shoe Movement and Women in Leadership council within the organisation, these are not formalised mentorship programs and more geared toward creating hype. Many of the participants found it to be ineffective and had little awareness of its purpose or how to access it. The lack of formalised support can hinder women's career progression and development. Without mentors, women may struggle to navigate the complexities of organisational politics, develop their leadership skills, and build their networks. Many participants felt that the organisation should have a more deliberate and intentional approach to mentorship, with many participants taking their own initiatives to reach out to female sub-ordinates and women in junior and middle leadership and mentoring them. A previous study shows that mentorship plays an important role in providing guidance and support to women in leadership by helping them navigate their careers (Bertrand, Stader and Copeland, 2018).

5.8. Lack of executive leadership training and development

The general feedback from participants indicated that the organisation does not offer adequate executive leadership training and development opportunities for women. When opportunities for training do come along, they are not shared with women leaders so there is no visibility and male leaders in the organisation are being prioritised for them. Charlton (2023) suggests that a lack of investment in women's development can limit their potential and perpetuate the gender gap in leadership.

5.9. Lack of allyship and advocacy

Previous research highlights the importance of allyship and advocacy in creating a more inclusive workplace for women, where allies are both male and females who are essential for driving systemic change by challenging biases, amplifying women's voices, and advocating for equitable policies (Kossek et al., 2024). However, the findings suggest that there is a lack of allyship and advocacy from male colleagues as well as male and female senior leaders. The responses from majority of the participants indicate that there is a need for formal and intentional allyship and advocacy programs. Having allyship and advocacy programs can challenge gender bias, amplify women's voices and create an inclusive work environment.

5.10. Queen bee syndrome

The study found evidence of the Queen bee syndrome among some women in senior leadership positions. This phenomenon occurs when women in leadership positions adopt behaviours that reinforce gender stereotypes and exclude other women (Achhnani and Gupta, 2022). From the feedback received it was found that some women in leadership are overly critical of their female colleagues and sub-ordinates and purposefully make themselves unavailable to assist or offer constructive feedback. Many participants made references to cliques, gossiping and toxic traits from some women in senior leadership. Some participants said they felt attacked and singled-out in meetings by other female leaders, which negatively impacted their self-esteem and confidence.

5.11. Gender bias and stereotyping

Gender bias and stereotyping continue to be significant barriers for women in senior leadership positions. Women may be perceived as less competent, less decisive, and less assertive than their male counterparts (Khanam and Ishrat, 2024). Many participants feel that there is bias towards males in the organisation with new senior positions being given to male with no visibility that these roles were available or vacant, and no transparency on the selection

criteria for the roles. The organisation seems to be experiencing the effects of the glass escalator for males and the glass ceiling for females (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023).

5.12. Low self-confidence and self-esteem

The challenges faced by women in senior leadership positions can negatively impact their self-confidence and self-esteem (Zhao, 2020). This can lead to self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and a reluctance to take on new challenges (Clance and Imes, 1978). Many of the participants said that they had female sub-ordinates and women in junior and middle management that reported to them, who were technically competent and high performing but reluctant to take on higher roles due to low self-confidence in their abilities as compared to their male counterparts, who were more willing to take on roles that they did not have the necessary technical skill or ability in. Studies have shown that compared to men, women are less likely to receive challenging positions because they are perceived to be too emotional or having family responsibilities and when they were offered such opportunities women were 11% more likely to turn them down than men at 2% (Zhao, 2020). To progress and grow in their careers women need to develop confidence (Baumeister et al., 2003).

5.13. Succession planning

The organisation's succession planning processes do not adequately consider the needs and aspirations of women in senior leadership positions. This can limit their opportunities for career advancement and create a pipeline problem for future female leaders. The inadequacy of female representation in senior leadership positions is because of poor succession planning (Bertrand, Stader and Copeland, 2018). The feedback from participants were that performance development cannot be an administrative activity driven by human resources, leadership needs to effectively drive succession planning if it wants to attain gender equality and participation.

5.14. Work-life balance

The demands of senior leadership roles can negatively impact women's work-life balance. The results show that the participants felt conflicted to prove their competence to the organisation for time taken off to attend to their family responsibilities leading them to over-compensate or prioritise work commitments to the detriment of their family relationship resulting in mom-guilt and a feeling of discontentment. This can lead to burnout, stress, and decreased job satisfaction (Barkhuizen, Masakane and Van der Sluis, 2022). The participants felt that post-Covid-19 their flexibility and ability to work from home has eased some of their stress, but they continue to feel pressure when meetings are set after hours or early mornings. They also felt

that they were not able to network and socialise after hours like most of their male counterparts due to family commitments which may have affected relationship building with male stakeholders in the organisation.

5.15. Benefits of having more women in senior leadership positions

Results from the research study found that participants felt that the organisation could benefit from the diversity of viewpoints and creativity that women bring from a leadership perspective and from a competency perspective. All participants acknowledged the importance of having gender equal representation and diversity in the organisation and the benefits of innovation and creativity that collaboration between male and female leaders can foster. Previous research suggests that organisations with a higher proportion of women in leadership positions tend to exhibit more inclusive and diverse cultures, which resulted in organisations achieving increased profitability and productivity, improved ability to attract and retain talent (International Labour Organisation, 2019). Diversity can foster creativity, innovation, and improved problem-solving abilities (International Labour Organisation, 2019).

5.16. Summary

This chapter presented a discussion of the results from the research study which highlighted the challenges that women in senior leadership experience in researched retail organisation. The results were also compared to and supported views of academic literature.

The next chapter concludes the study.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Introduction

Women remain largely underrepresented in senior leadership and C-suite positions despite the enactment of legislation to promote gender equality and gender parity in the workplace. While there has been improvement in recent years, progress to achieve gender equality has been slow. The objective of the study was to examine the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa. The second objective of the study was to examine the support measures that was required by women in senior leadership positions to enhance their performance and career development and to provide recommendations to the retail organisation on how to mitigate the challenges identified and promote greater gender diversity in leadership.

A qualitative research approach was adopted, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with female leaders in vice-president and executive positions in the retail organisation to understand their lived experiences. The data collected from the research study was thematically analysed to identify key themes. The results and discussion chapters highlighted the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership in a retail organisation in South Africa and addressed the benefits that organisations can attain by having a more gender equitable workforce. This chapter is the conclusion of the research study and will discuss recommendations that organisations can implement to address the challenges that women in senior leadership experience in organisations.

6.2. Addressing the research objectives

The key findings from the themes that were developed during the data analysis, and which are aligned to the research objectives will be discussed.

6.2.1. Research objective 1:

To identify the challenges that women in senior leadership experience in executing their roles and responsibilities in a retail organisation in South Africa

The findings of this research underscore the significant challenges faced by women in senior leadership roles. The pervasive influence of patriarchal and white male-dominated organisational cultures creates a hostile environment that perpetuates gender inequality. The absence of formalised mentorship programs and suitable role models limits women's opportunities for career progression and knowledge sharing. Additionally, the lack of targeted executive leadership training and development initiatives hinders women's ability to acquire

the necessary skills and competencies to excel in senior leadership positions. Ineffective diversity and inclusion initiatives, coupled with a lack of allyship and advocacy, further exacerbate the challenges faced by women. The prevalence of queen bee syndrome, where women in leadership positions may exhibit discriminatory behaviour towards other women, can create additional barriers to advancement. Gender bias and stereotyping, often rooted in unconscious biases, can lead to discriminatory practices and hinder women's career progression. Moreover, low self-confidence and self-esteem can undermine women's ability to assert themselves and negotiate for their career goals. The challenges identified in this study have significant implications for women leaders' roles, career progression, development opportunities, and work-life balance. These challenges can lead to increased stress, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction. Moreover, they can limit women's access to senior leadership positions and hinder their ability to achieve their full potential.

6.2.2. Research objective 2:

To examine the support measures that women in senior leadership require from a retail organisation in South Africa to enhance their performance and career development

To address the challenges identified, the retail organisation must implement a comprehensive range of support measures. Firstly, fostering a culture of inclusivity and gender equality is paramount. This involves challenging patriarchal norms, promoting gender sensitivity, and implementing policies that address gender-based discrimination. Secondly, establishing robust mentorship and sponsorship programs can provide women with invaluable guidance, support, and opportunities for career advancement.

Investing in executive leadership training and development programs tailored to the specific needs of women can equip them with the necessary skills and competencies to excel in senior leadership roles. Additionally, organisations should prioritise diversity and inclusion initiatives that actively promote gender equality and create a supportive work environment. Encouraging allyship and advocacy can help to challenge discriminatory behaviours and create a more equitable workplace.

6.2.3. Research objective 3:

To provide recommendations to the retail organisation in South Africa on the benefits of having more women in senior leadership positions and how the retail organisation can mitigate the challenges identified in the study

Research has consistently demonstrated that organisations with greater gender diversity in leadership positions tend to outperform those with less diversity (Masterson, 2023). Increased female leadership can lead to improved decision-making, enhanced innovation, and stronger financial performance. To mitigate the challenges identified in this study, organisations should implement targeted interventions such as parental leave policies, flexible work arrangements and childcare support to enhance work-life balance. Moreover, fostering a culture of psychological safety can empower women to speak up, share their ideas, and challenge the status quo.

6.3. Recommendations

These recommendations are informed by the findings of this study, which examined the barriers to women's advancement and the strategies that can be employed to foster a more inclusive and equitable workplace.

6.3.1. Mentorship and role models

Formal mentorship programs: Organisations should establish structured mentorship programs that pair senior women leaders with emerging female talent. These programs can provide guidance, support, and career advice, helping women to navigate organisational politics and develop essential leadership skills and help women leaders to build their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Visible role models: Organisations should actively promote women leaders and showcase their achievements. This can be done through public recognition, speaking engagements, and leadership development programs. By highlighting successful women, organisations can inspire and motivate other women to aspire to senior leadership positions. Positive reinforcement by recognising and rewarding women's achievements can help to boost their self-confidence.

Mentorship and sponsorship: Mentorship and sponsorship programs can help to accelerate the development of women leaders. Assigning women leaders stretch assignment or to lead special projects with the guidance of a sponsor can help build confidence and capabilities.

6.3.2. Training and development

Leadership development programs: Organisations should offer targeted leadership development programs that address the specific needs and challenges of women leaders. These programs should focus on building confidence, assertiveness, negotiation skills, and strategic thinking.

Executive coaching: Executive coaching can provide personalised support and guidance to women leaders, helping them to develop their leadership skills and overcome obstacles.

6.3.3. Diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion training: All employees, including senior leaders, should undergo diversity and inclusion training to raise awareness of unconscious bias, stereotypes, and microaggressions. This training can help to create an awareness of the ways in which gender bias can influence decision-making and how to create a more inclusive and respectful workplace.

Diversity and inclusion policies and procedures: Organisations should develop and implement clear diversity and inclusion policies and procedures. These policies should address issues such as recruitment, promotion, compensation, and workplace culture. The implementation of blind recruitment and promotion processes can reduce the impact of gender bias on hiring and advancement decisions. It is important that the C-suite leaders in the organisation drive and actively promote these practices. It should also be included in senior leaders' key performance indicators to drive accountability.

6.3.4. Allyship and advocacy

Male allies: Men in leadership positions should be encouraged to become allies of women and to advocate for gender equality. They can do this by mentoring women, challenging gender bias, and speaking up against discriminatory behaviour.

Women in leadership council: The council can provide a supportive community for women and can be a powerful tool for advocacy and change. It needs to be proactive, have deliverables that are measurable and also linked to key performance indicators to ensure that it acts according to its mandate and actively drive advocacy for women.

6.3.5. Queen bee syndrome

Leadership training: Leadership training can help women leaders to develop empathy, collaboration, and mentorship skills. This can reduce the likelihood of Queen Bee Syndrome.

Open communication: Open and honest communication between women leaders can help to build trust and collaboration. Creating mechanisms to address queen bee syndrome in the organisation by creating visibility on the issue, having mechanisms that women leaders and sub-ordinates can use to report negative behaviours, offer counselling and coaching to women who exhibit queen bee tendencies and are 'victims' of it and offer soft skills courses that create self-awareness, teach conflict management and how to foster a positive work environment.

6.3.6. Succession planning

Pipeline development: Organisations should develop a pipeline of talented women to fill future leadership roles and actively coach them and put them on executive leadership programs, so they are ready when positions become available.

Mentorship and sponsorship: Mentorship and sponsorship programs can help to accelerate the development of women leaders. Assigning women leaders stretch assignment or to lead special projects with the guidance of a sponsor can help build confidence and capabilities.

6.3.7. Work-life balance

Flexible work arrangements: Remote work and flexible hours, can help women to balance their work and family responsibilities.

Parental leave policies: Generous parental leave policies can help women to maintain their careers after having children.

6.4. Recommendations for future research

Women in leadership experience challenges to progress and advance in their careers, achieve work-life balance, have gender equality and parity for opportunities, promotion, equitable pay, benefits and respect compared to their male peers. Researchers can expand on this study by gaining a perspective from women in junior and middle management levels on their experiences and challenges which may differ from women in senior leadership. Researchers can also include male leaders and sub-ordinates to gain an understanding on their perspectives.

Another recommendation is that the study be expanded to include other retail organisations and to gain a perspective of the women in senior leadership positions from those retail organisations and compare results. The study can also be expanded to include retail organisations in other countries outside of South Africa to assess the impact of different cultures on the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership in retail and how the perspectives compared based on cultural practices, values and beliefs.

Future research could also involve utilising a larger sample and undertaking a quantitative survey to identify how prevalent these challenges are throughout South Africa, and which challenges are perceived as the most critical and requiring the most urgent attention. The survey could potentially identify which challenges contribute the most to the problems and which challenges are the quickest to resolve, i.e. the low hanging fruit.

6.5. Summary

This study aimed at examining the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa. By addressing the challenges faced by women in senior leadership roles and implementing effective support measures, retail organisations can create a more equitable and inclusive workplace. This will not only benefit women but also contribute to the overall success and sustainability of the organisation. As South Africa continues to evolve, it is imperative that organisations prioritise gender equality and empower women to reach their full potential.

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APPENDIX 1: INFORMED CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS & LEADERSHIP
COLLEGE OF LAW AND MANAGEMENT STUDIES

MBA Research Project
Researcher: Diana Ramouthar
Supervisors: Prof Cecile Gerwel Proches

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is Diana Ramouthar from the Masters in Business Administration Program at the Graduate School of Business and Leadership, University of KwaZulu-Natal (e-mail: 200270730@stu.ukzn.ac.za and cellphone: [REDACTED])

You are invited to consider participating in a study that involves research into 'Examining the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa.' The aim and purpose of this research is to understand the challenges of women in senior leadership in executing their roles, responsibilities, career growth and the support that is required from the organisation to address barriers and bias. The study is expected to enrol 16 participants across the group which will comprise of 8 Vice Presidents and 8 Executives. It will involve a 1-hour interview session where a series of demographic and research related questions will be asked to understand your lived experiences and to establish if there are any common themes raised by all participants. The duration of your participation if you choose to enrol and remain in the study is expected to be 1 hour. The study is funded by me.

I hope that the study will create an awareness in the business of the challenges women in senior leadership experience and that proactive measures can be implemented to address the concerns raised.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSSREC/00006937/2024).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at [REDACTED] or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw participation at any point. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation the participants will not incur penalty or loss of treatment or other benefit to which they are normally entitled. Should you wish to withdraw participation, please email me to inform me of your decision so that I can remove you as a participant and safely dispose of your research material. There will be no negative consequences to you as a participant should you wish to withdraw.

There are no anticipated costs that might be incurred by yourself as a result of participation in the study.

The names and details of the participants of the research will remain anonymous and your responses will not be shared in the dissertation or to the Group in a manner that will make your identity know. All data will be presented as themes and collective responses. The data will be stored for a period of 5 years by the University and will thereafter be disposed of in a responsible manner to ensure that the confidentiality of the participant is protected.

--

CONSENT

I (Name of Participant) have been informed about the study entitled 'Examining the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa' by Diana Ramouthar.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have answered to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at [REDACTED] or 200270730@stu.ukzn.ac.za.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)

Date

APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Topic: Examining the challenges of women in senior leadership positions in a retail organisation in South Africa

Demographics:

1. What is your ethnic group?
 - a) African
 - b) White
 - c) Indian
 - d) Coloured
 - e) Other

2. What is your age group?
 - a) 21 - 30 years old
 - b) 31 - 40 years old
 - c) 41 - 50 years old
 - d) 51 - 60 years old
 - e) 60 - 65 years old

3. What is your highest qualification?
 - a) Less than Matric
 - b) Matric
 - c) Diploma
 - d) Degree
 - e) Postgraduate/ Honours
 - f) Masters
 - g) Doctorate

4. What is your present level with the organisation?
 - a) Executive
 - b) Vice President

5. What is your length of service within the Group?
 - a) 0 – 5 years
 - b) 6 – 10 years
 - c) 11 – 20 years
 - d) 21 -30 years
 - e) > 30 years

6. How long have you been in your current leadership position in the Group?
 - a) 0 – 5 years
 - b) 6 – 10 years
 - c) 11 – 20 years
 - d) 21 -30 years
 - e) > 30 years

7. Have you held any other leadership positions in the Group?

- a) Yes
- b) No

8. Do you have children that require your supervision and care?
- a) Yes
 - b) No

Interview Questions:

1. What is your role and responsibilities within the group?
2. What challenges have you experienced as a senior leader in executing your roles and responsibilities in the group?
3. Do you feel that there is adequate female representation in senior leadership positions in the group? Please elaborate.
4. What do you think is the most significant barrier that restricts having more women in senior leadership positions?
5. What challenges have you experienced in leading male and female associates? How do you manage the situation?
6. What challenges have you experienced in being led by male and female associates? How do you manage the situation?
7. What challenges have you experienced with power structures in the group? How did you manage the situation?
8. What challenges have you experienced with managing your career and personal life? How do you manage the challenges?
9. What do you think the benefits would be for the group from having more women in senior leadership positions considering the group's customer dynamics?
10. What do you think the benefits would be for the group from having more women in senior leadership positions from an associate perspective?
11. Do you think that the group provides adequate opportunities for women to reach senior and executive leadership positions in the group? Please elaborate.
12. How can women in senior leadership positions receive more support to enhance their performance and career development within the group?
13. What do you think the group can do to promote more women into senior management or executive positions?
14. Do you think the group should create awareness sessions on the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions within the group to promote allyship? Please elaborate.

15. Do you think that there are benefits from fostering allyship? Please elaborate.

16. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX 3: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



08 May 2024

Diana Elaine Ramouthar (200270730)
Grad School of Bus & Leadership
Westville Campus

Dear DE Ramouthar,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00006937/2024

Project title: Examining the challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions in a retail organization in South Africa

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 26 April 2024 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 08 May 2025.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)
/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX 4: GATEKEEPER LETTER



Prof Cecile Gerwel Proches
Graduate School of Business and Leadership
University Of KwaZulu-Natal
Westville Campus
Durban
3630

18 April 2024

Dear Prof Cecile Gerwel Proches

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

This letter serves to confirm that [REDACTED] hereby acknowledge and approve the research of Diana Ramouthar within the [REDACTED] for the completion of her MBA degree.

I hereby consent to the following:

- Use of company reports for research
- Non-disclosure of the company's name as the research site

Sincerely,

