



**The Development and retention of women in senior management positions:
Johannesburg Roads Agency (JRA) in the City of Johannesburg**

by

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DECLARATION

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DEDICATION

As I immerse myself in this thesis, I cannot help but reflect on the cherished memories of my late beloved grandmother, Ntombonina Maria Dlamini, and my late father, Lucas Matabane. Their steadfast support and imparted values of determination, perseverance, and faith in a higher power have propelled me to be where I am today. I am filled with pride in my accomplishments and a resolute commitment to making a positive impact on the world.

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This thesis represents the culmination of a lifetime of work, honouring the cherished memories of my loved ones and my family's aspirations. It is a passionate and thorough scholarly pursuit that reflects the personal and professional evolution that has shaped my journey. I aspire for this thesis to serve as a source of inspiration for women everywhere, empowering them to pursue their dreams, make a meaningful impact on society, and assert their rightful place in industries that men have traditionally dominated.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the development and retention of women in senior management positions within the Johannesburg Roads Agency (JRA) in the City of Johannesburg (CoJ). The study was conducted through a qualitative research approach utilising semi-structured interviews to gain insights from JRA employees. The following objectives guided the research: identify the barriers that women have faced in advancing to senior management positions, evaluate the effectiveness of JRA's current policies and practices in promoting gender diversity, and recommend strategies that can be implemented to enhance women's development and retention in senior management positions. The study's findings suggest that women in JRA face significant barriers to advancing to senior management positions. These barriers include the lack of women-focused mentorship opportunities as well as gender stereotypes and cultural biases. The study also found that current policies and practices at JRA do not adequately promote gender diversity.

The study recommends several strategies for enhancing women's development and retention in senior management positions. These include increasing mentorship opportunities, implementing gender-sensitive policies, and promoting a culture of inclusivity and diversity.

This study contributes to the existing literature on gender diversity in organisations by shedding light on the challenges women face in senior management positions. The findings provide insights to enhance policies and practices that promote gender diversity and women's advancement in organisations. This study provides evidence-based information to inform policy development and organisational practices within public sector institutions such as JRA and similar entities to address gender inequality and improve women's representation in leadership.

KEY WORDS

Women, senior management, retention, career advancement, mentorship, barriers, gender diversity, gender equality.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ABBREVIATIONS	ACRONYMS
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CoJ	City of Johannesburg
EE	Employment Equity
EEA	Employment Equity Act
HR	Human Resource
HCT	Human Capital Theory
ILO	International Labour Organization
JRA	Johannesburg Road Agency
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
UNISA	University of South Africa

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Gender equality and women's development in organisations have become increasingly important topics in recent years. According to the Dolan et al. (2020), companies with a diverse workforce, including gender diversity, are more likely to outperform their competitors. Additionally, the same report found that companies with a greater presence of women in leadership roles often experience higher levels of innovation and creativity. These findings emphasise the significance of gender diversity within organisations and its positive impact on firm performance, innovation, and creativity (Kaur & Arora 2020).

However, despite increasing recognition of the benefits of gender diversity, women still face barriers to advancement and retention in the workplace. Research has found that women are underrepresented in senior management positions and remain stable in lower to middle management roles, rarely progressing to senior ones due to cultural barriers, attitudes, biases, stereotypes, and social roles impeding advancement (Lee, 2021). In addition to limited advancement, retention is a critical challenge, as many women exit leadership pipelines due to unsupportive organisational cultures, lack of career development opportunities, and inadequate mentorship and support systems, contributing to ongoing turnover in senior roles

Chapter 1 explores these issues in more detail and introduces the research objectives, problem statement, research questions, methodology and design of the study. Additionally, it defines key terms and explains the significance of the study. The chapter highlights the cultural barriers and social roles that inhibit both the advancement and retention of women in senior positions (Kyambade et al., 2024). By drawing on various sources, including academic research and industry reports, this chapter sheds light on the importance of gender equality in organisations and provides insights into how organisations can create a more inclusive workplace that supports both the progression and retention of women in leadership roles. This study is primarily

guided by the empowerment framework, which is used to interpret women's access to opportunities, agency, and organisational structures. Human capital theory is used as a complementary lens to explain how organisational investment in skills development influences career progression and retention.

1.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

According to Onalaja and Otokiti (2022), the growing emphasis on gender inclusivity in the workplace is driven by compelling evidence of its positive impact on organisations. Studies such as Hazaea et al. (2023), Aziz and Cek (2025), and Almaqtari et al. (2024) demonstrate a clear link between gender diversity and improved financial performance. This positive correlation is further supported by research from Naseviciute and Juceviciene (2024), who highlight how diverse teams foster a more inclusive culture and enhance decision-making processes. These benefits stem from the diverse perspectives and ideas that women bring to the table, influencing workplace behaviour, establishing different team norms, and considering a broader range of stakeholders (Ashikali et al., 2021). By examining the challenges and opportunities women face within the JRA's organisational context, this research aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the factors that hinder or facilitate women's advancement and retention in leadership roles within the state-owned entity (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

Alex-Omiogbemi et al. (2024) indicated that the ongoing gender gap in leadership roles is a major challenge. This underrepresentation is deeply embedded in societal structures, norms, and traditional social roles that often limit women's opportunities (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Furthermore, cultural impediments, such as non-inclusive work environments, unequal development opportunities, and increased pressure on women in the workplace, contribute to this disparity (Masood, 2023). Naseviciute and Juceviciene (2024) identify a reluctance to change within organisations as a hindering factor, highlighting the complex interplay of social and organisational barriers that women face. This persistent gap is well documented by organisations like the International Labour Organisation (2019) and the United Nations (2020), emphasising the urgent need to address these issues.

This thesis aimed to improve the understanding of the relationship between gender diversity in leadership and organisational dynamics, specifically within the context of South Africa. The existing literature suggests a connection (Naseviciute and Juceviciene 2024; Sohlström 2022), but further research is needed to explore how gender diversity in leadership affects organisational practices and structures. Since this study focused on participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and beliefs, it did not investigate direct relationships or examine long-term organisational success. Instead, the research explored the socio-cultural factors that affect the rise of women to senior leadership positions in South Africa, shedding light on the barriers and enablers they encounter in reaching these roles.

Alex-Omiogbemi et al. (2024) found that women bring diverse perspectives and experiences to organisations, fostering creativity, stability, and resilience. This in turn can enhance a company's ability to develop innovative products and services that drive financial performance. Research demonstrates that organisations with more women in senior management positions score higher on various organisational criteria, including improved financial performance (Martins & Parsons, 2007; Decaux et al., 2008; Mousa et al., 2021; Al Amosh, 2025). These findings emphasise the importance of fostering gender inclusivity in the workplace, not only for ethical reasons but also to maximise organisational performance.

The increased inclusion of women in executive roles has been shown to positively impact a company's performance, reputation, and product or service quality (del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al., 2023). Companies can benefit by implementing appropriate policies, including those that retain and promote more women. Gender diversity also creates a larger pool of talented individuals and strengthens financial performance, making it a worthwhile investment. Successful coaching, mentoring, and networking programmes have been instrumental in helping female executives achieve tremendous success by encouraging them to pursue new opportunities more assertively (Alex-Omiogbemi et al., 2024).

Laursen and Austin (2020) highlight that women are well-qualified and represent the majority in several fields such as public administration, business management, engineering, building engineering, corporate services management, monitoring and

evaluation, and strategy formulation and development, with many holding honours, master's, and PhD. degrees. Despite their qualifications, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles. This challenges the notion that employment decisions are based solely on qualifications, not gender. In South Africa, for example, women in engineering predominantly focus on industrial engineering, rather than exploring other sub-disciplines within the field (Abdelhay, 2022). This trend can be seen across various countries, though the specific circumstances and barriers may differ by local context and cultural factors.

The Johannesburg Roads Agency (JRA) Annual Report 2022/23 highlights a concerning trend of underrepresentation and a shortage of women in upper management roles within JRA and other municipal entities (Elkhwesky et al., 2025). This issue persists despite efforts at various levels of local government to improve the development and proportion of female executives (Jansen, 2024). For instance, the high-level organisational structure outlined in the JRA's Business Plan 2022/23 indicates an ongoing disparity, with women holding only 2 of 9 senior management positions (Johannesburg Roads Agency [JRA], 2023b). This underrepresentation of women in senior management is a persistent issue, as evidenced by the lack of significant progress in JRA's Annual Reports. While the 2022/23 report shows a slight improvement, previous reports from 2016/17 to 2018/19 indicated that only one or two women held senior management positions. This slow rate of progress underscores the need for further investigation into the factors contributing to this persistent gender gap within the JRA.

1.3 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

JRA was established as a public entity in 2001 under the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) and bears the weighty responsibility of developing and maintaining the city's vast road network and stormwater infrastructure (JRA, 2023b). The agency's comprehensive mandate encompasses multifaceted responsibilities, including the design, construction, and rehabilitation of roads, bridges, and culverts, as well as the management of traffic signals, signage, and stormwater systems (JRA, 2023b). The JRA's multifaceted operations require a diverse, skilled workforce that draws on the

expertise of engineers, architects, planners, and other professionals to effectively execute its mandate (JRA, 2023b).

Given the JRA's significant role in the city's development and service delivery, examining the agency's internal dynamics is imperative, particularly regarding gender representation in leadership positions. While the JRA boasts a well-defined organisational structure with a management team overseeing various departments, the representation of women in senior management is an area of interest and potential improvement (JRA, 2023b). Given the global push for gender equality and recognising the value of diverse perspectives in organisational leadership, understanding the factors influencing the development and retention of women in higher-level ranks within JRA is paramount (Vassie et al., 2020).

The JRA faces a dual challenge in its efforts to build a representative workforce. Firstly, the agency operates within the context of a global deficit of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, which are fundamental to JRA's core functions in building and infrastructure development (George, 2024a). This scarcity of STEM-related female talent is a significant hurdle in attracting and retaining qualified women for technical and leadership roles within the organisation. Secondly, while the JRA acknowledges the importance of gender representation as advocated by the Employment Equity Act, 55 of 1998 (EEA), translating this Act into a practical implementable policy with positive outcomes is challenging (JRA, 2023a). The inherent gender disparities across the broader societal and professional landscape create obstacles to achieving equitable representation of women in senior management positions, particularly in industries traditionally dominated by men, such as engineering and construction.

The JRA's commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive work environment aligns with broader CoJ development goals and national imperatives (JRA, 2023b). The findings of this study will inform the development of targeted interventions and strategies to empower women, enhance gender equity, and ultimately improve the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the JRA's operations.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The underrepresentation of women in positions of authority in organisations has been widely recognised as a barrier to gender equality and diversity. Despite the numerous benefits of gender diversity in organisations, such as improved financial performance, innovation, and creativity, women face significant obstacles in advancing to senior management roles (Veckalne & Tambovceva, 2023). Despite the existence of employment equity frameworks and gender equality policies, there is limited empirical evidence explaining how organisational culture, leadership instability, and uneven developmental opportunities collectively influence the advancement and retention of women in senior management within the JRA context. The cultural barriers and social roles assigned to women have been identified as contributing factors to this problem (Naseviciute & Juceviciene 2024; Afzal et al., 2024). This study sought to investigate the barriers that women encounter in developing, accessing, and remaining in executive roles at the JRA (in the CoJ Metropolitan Municipality) and to identify strategies to promote gender equality and diversity in the workplace.

Over the years, women have faced discrimination leading to their marginalisation and exacerbating socio-economic disparities between men and women in terms of social and power relations, career advancement, appointments, and growth (Jordaan, 2022). Men dominate senior management positions worldwide, asserting management as a non-feminine occupation despite increasing female presence at senior executive levels (Tlaiss & Khanin, 2024).

Scholarship opportunities are important for supporting women's education and career advancement at the JRA, as they provide access to qualifications and skills that have historically been limited for women (Jordaan, 2022). Scholarships enabling women to enter STEM fields help build a pool of candidates capable of taking on senior management roles within organisations such as JRA. Studying the impact of such opportunities contributes to a deeper understanding of how targeted interventions can support gender transformation and organisational effectiveness (Mousa et al., 2021). Without these measures, women's development and retention in leadership are likely to remain constrained, limiting diversity in decision-making, reducing innovation, and

slowing progress toward both service delivery goals and broader gender equity objectives.

This study sought to understand and investigate the underrepresentation and retention of women in senior management positions at JRA and make recommendations on how women can be effectively integrated and retained in senior management positions. The limited understanding of how women develop into leadership roles and are retained in senior positions within JRA represents a key knowledge gap. The challenges that hinder women's development and retention in senior roles, the barriers they face in leadership positions, and the influence of social roles on their career progression were explored. The findings provide insight into gendered organisational dynamics and support HR strategies that promote inclusive leadership and strengthen organisational performance.

1.5 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to:

- Examine factors obstructing the development and retention of executives at JRA.
- Identify women's challenges when appointed to senior management positions at JRA.
- Investigate how women's social roles affect the advancement and retention of women in senior management roles at JRA.
- Recommend human resource (HR) strategies to facilitate integration, development, and retention of women in senior Management positions at JRA.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sets out to achieve its objectives by asking the following research questions:

- What factors obstruct women's development and retention in senior management positions at JRA?
- What are the challenges women face to be appointed to senior management positions in JRA?

- How do women's social roles affect their development and retention position of senior management?
- What HR strategies can be recommended to facilitate the integration and support of women in top management positions within JRA?

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The research is valuable as it contributes to our understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to developing and retaining women in senior management positions within public service organisations in South Africa. Specifically, the study aimed to identify HR strategies that can be recommended to facilitate the appointment and retention of women's continued presence in top management roles within the JRA. Despite the existence of the EEA, the JRA still has a low percentage of women in executive levels and possibly this is the case in other municipalities as well (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021). Therefore, these findings can potentially inform and shape HR strategies that could facilitate appointing and retaining women in positions of power within the JRA. Retaining female executives is a persistent problem that JRA continues to face despite the agency's EE plan which aims to promote gender diversity in leadership. The continuous discrepancy between policy and organisational reality highlights a practical challenge that is insufficiently understood. This study examined the barriers that constrained women's progression and retention in senior management at the JRA despite the Employment Equity Plan, offering guidance for HR policies and strategies to improve women's representation in executive positions.

The implications of this study go beyond the JRA, as they could influence HR practices and policies in other state-owned entities in South Africa. By addressing the specific challenges faced in the JRA, such as the obstacles to women's inclusion in senior management, the study contributes to broader discussions and actions to promote gender diversity and equality in leadership roles. Ultimately, the research findings could lead to the development and implementation of more effective HR strategies that benefit the JRA and other public service organisations, thereby fostering a more inclusive and diverse leadership landscape.

1.8 METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research design to explore participants' perspectives and experiences. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection, allowing for personalised interactions that addressed individual experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. This approach enabled the researcher to gather detailed data and capture a range of viewpoints and insights. The sampling method used was purposive sampling, selecting participants who had relevant experience or knowledge of the topic, ensuring that the data collected was meaningful and specific to the research question.

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations were an important aspect of the study and followed the ethical guidelines set by the University of South Africa (UNISA). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were aware of the nature of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. The study also protected participant privacy and ensured that personally identifiable information was safeguarded. Efforts were made to minimise any potential harm to participants, and the research was conducted with respect to all involved.

1.9.1 Delimitations of the study

This study was delimited to the exploration of factors influencing the career advancement of women in senior management positions within the Johannesburg Road Agency (JRA). Although the experiences and advancement of women constituted the primary unit of analysis, data were collected from women in senior management positions, male managers, and relevant HR personnel to provide a comprehensive organisational perspective on the barriers, enablers, and human resource practices influencing women's career progression. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups was intended to enhance the depth and credibility of the findings rather than to conduct a gender-comparative study.

The study was further delimited to a single municipal entity, namely JRA, within the City of Johannesburg. As such, the findings reflect the experiences and perceptions

of participants within this specific organisational setting and were not intended to represent all municipalities, public entities, or private sector organisations. The study concentrated specifically on issues related to career development, gender disparity, organisational support structures, and strategies for improving women's advancement into senior leadership positions.

In addition, the study adopted a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth insights into participants lived experiences and perceptions regarding women's leadership progression. The emphasis on qualitative inquiry meant that the study prioritised depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation.

Despite these delimitations, certain limitations were encountered. Access to female managers was constrained by organisational demands and the nature of senior managerial responsibilities, which influenced participant availability. The relatively small sample size and reliance on participant perceptions may also limit broader generalisation of findings beyond the JRA context. Furthermore, time constraints restricted the extent to which additional perspectives could be explored.

1.10 DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

Development of women in leadership: Initiatives aimed at enhancing women's skills and preparing them for senior management roles (Smith, 2019).

Retention of women in leadership: Policies and strategies to ensure women remain in senior management roles, such as those related to work-life balance (Jones et al., 2019).

Senior management positions: High-level roles that involve decision-making and overseeing operations, such as directors or executives (Wilden et al., 2023).

Gender equality: Equal access to leadership opportunities for all genders (Nanni, 2023).

Johannesburg Road Agency (JRA): The public agency responsible for managing road infrastructure in the CoJ (JRA, 2023b).

Workplace diversity: The inclusion of individuals from different backgrounds and genders in the workplace (Singh & Ramdeo, 2023).

Organisational culture: The shaping of the work environment and its influences on the development, support, and retention of women in senior management (Wijethilake et al., 2023).

1.11 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY'S CHAPTERS

Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the JRA as an entity within the CoJ in Gauteng province. This chapter provides an outline of the study and theoretical perspectives on the challenges women face in acquiring executive-level jobs. The study's background, research problem, research questions, and research objectives are outlined. Additionally, the first chapter discusses methodology for research and qualitative design, ethical considerations, key concept definitions, the implication of the study, and the study's limitations and delimitations.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature and Theoretical Structure

Chapter 2 focuses on existing literature regarding the development as well as retention of women in top-tier roles, undertaking a comprehensive examination of essential conceptual bases, ideas, characteristics attributes of the study. It takes a critical approach to understanding the barriers to developing women as well as retention of women in directorate roles within organisations.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

Chapter 3 presents the design of research used by the researcher, which is a qualitative study. It outlines the sampling methods used and the Atlas.ti twenty-three software used for data analysis. Ethical issues such as trustworthiness are addressed in this chapter.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Presentation

Chapter 4 presents the findings in the context of the literature review that was carried out. The data collected was analysed by the researcher and an external coder resulting in various themes as well as sub-themes. A qualitative tool, Atlas.ti 23, was used to analyse transcripts and create network diagrams and data visualisations. The findings are presented in a narrative form based on themes.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the Findings

Chapter 5 is a comprehensive exposition of the findings derived from the data analysis procedure. This section critically examines the results, providing a detailed account of the research outcomes.

Chapter 6: Answers to Research Questions, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Chapter 6 includes conclusive remarks, suggestions, and recommendations based on the study's extensive analysis and findings.

1.12 SUMMARY

This chapter presented the critical components of the study, including the problem statement, research questions, research objectives, introduction, background, and overview. The research methodology and design, and the ethical considerations were presented. The chapter concluded with an outline of the chapters of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The primary focus of the study was to explore how JRA recruits, retains, and develops women in managerial positions while identifying knowledge gaps. Thus, this chapter reviews current literature on developing and retaining women in senior management. Previous studies on gender representation in senior management are examined to identify areas of research that have already been explored, consequently preventing duplication of efforts. This chapter reviews the literature on global and South African barriers that women encounter in advancing to senior management positions, the impact of women's social roles on their eligibility for senior management roles, and HR practices and processes utilised worldwide and in South Africa to promote the professional development of women in positions of influence. Additionally, the chapter highlights the theoretical frameworks that underline this study.

2.2 THE GLOBAL PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN EXECUTIVE ROLES

Employment is a contractual relationship between an employer and employee in which the employee receives ongoing wages or salary, encompassing general, technical, or highly skilled work. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “employment is a fundamental right” (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) because it fosters individuals' economic, emotional, and social development (Moyn, 2014).

When addressing women's employment and representation at JRA it is crucial to consider that the presumed employer operates in the public sector which is the largest employer in South Africa, underscoring the importance of discussing gender parity in managerial roles (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). The section of the economy regulated by the government is called the public sector and it oversees the provision of goods and services to citizens (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017).

Smith and Sinkford (2022) argue that women's underrepresentation in global executive positions wastes talent and human capital, resulting in missed opportunities for gender parity and skill advancement. Several academics have contributed to this argument. According to Roos (2020), while women's presence in administrative roles in the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) is increasing, their representation in senior managerial positions in the public sector is not maintaining pace. This is supported by Benson et al. (2024) who observe that the rating of women's potential is low, implying that businesses underestimate the talents of their female employees. Osituyo (2018) asserts that fairness to both men and women is a key human right and development aim in South Africa. Despite widespread acceptance of the empowerment of women and gender equality as important national goals, these ideas remain elusive in the work context.

Women are outnumbered in senior management occupations, with their decision-making involvement remaining minimal and equal representation remaining elusive (Gladys & Maghanga, 2025). This ongoing issue significantly affects the recognition of women's accomplishments in the workplace. While some progress has been made, the pace of change is slow. Grant Thornton's 2020 Women in Business report Thornton, (2020) reveals that globally, women hold 32% of senior management positions, a slight increase from previous years but still far from parity. This data points to the existence of underlying obstacles facing while advancing into executive positions and highlights the need for organisations to accelerate their efforts towards achieving gender balance (Faugoo, 2024).

Goryunova and Madsen's (2024) research paints a varied picture of female representation in senior management roles across different regions. While Africa demonstrates a relatively strong performance at 33%, mirroring Eastern Europe and Latin America (including Peru, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Paraguay), other regions lag. The European Union reports 30% representation, Northern America 29%, and the Asia Pacific region trails at 27% (Canton, 2021b). This disparity underscores the persistent challenge globally of women's underrepresentation at the leadership and senior management level, as confirmed by (Mathebula, 2024). Despite some progress, deeply ingrained cultural practices continue to obstruct the progression of women. In many southern European and Latin American countries, for

instance, the prevailing view persists that women should prioritise family responsibilities only, posing a serious challenge to attaining gender parity in positions of authority (Thornton, 2020).

Although there is some progress in increasing visibility targeting the integration of women in positions of decision-making in the United States (from 17% in 2015 to 21% in 2023) there is still much work to be done (Green & Hand, 2024). Despite this progress, achieving parity remains a concern. The situation is similar in Australia, where women comprise almost 50% of the workforce, and 40% hold full-time jobs. However, they remain poorly represented in positions of power. Unfortunately, men's domination of senior roles in organisations worldwide means that achieving female representation and equality in senior management positions could take centuries (Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, 2019).

Lee (2021) highlights the global issue of women's under-representation in senior management, emphasising the stark disparities across countries. In Japan, for instance, women hold a mere 0.8% of chief executive officer (CEO) occupations, which is less than 10% of executive roles. Even in nations where women are more recognised in top management, such as Norway, where 35.5% of board members are female, there is still a long way to go before parity is attained (Goryunova & Madsen, 2024). This discrepancy is particularly concerning in countries where women make up a significant portion of the population, such as Greece, France, Portugal, and Mexico (Bedowska-Sójka et al., 2024). This disconnect between women's educational attainment and their representation in top leadership positions is a global trend.

According to Allen et al. (2021) notwithstanding the progress women have made in education, their progress has not translated into reaching top professional positions. The global labour force participation rate for women lies at 50% (Klasen et al., 2021), significantly lower than the 76% rate for men, further underscoring the persistent barriers women face in advancing their careers (Heath et al., 2024). These trends underscore the urgent need for greater gender diversity and inclusion in leadership positions globally.

While women remain poorly represented in many leadership roles globally, some countries demonstrate more balanced representation in senior management and executive positions specifically. Turkey, for instance, exhibits a higher proportion of women in these roles, which typically involve high levels of responsibility, decision-making authority, and influence within organisations, compared to many industrialised Western nations (Lee, 2021). This suggests that cultural and societal norms in certain countries may be more conducive to women's career progression. Spain also demonstrates progress, with a growing number of women in positions of power, while the Netherlands has maintained a stable, albeit low, diversification of women in managerial roles at 2% (Lee, 2021).

Despite a growing number of countries implementing legislation to support women in the workplace and leadership positions, many of these initiatives have proven ineffective (Lee, 2021), indicating the need for more impactful and targeted interventions.

2.3 THE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THEIR REPRESENTATION IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT POSITIONS

According to Marais (2021), legislation must be in place to promote equality and prevent discrimination against all individuals, as stated in the Republic of South Africa's Constitution of 1996. The Constitution highlights the measures that should be adopted to encourage holistic equality in society and is amplified regarding employment in the EEA. The EEA outlines the necessary steps for institutions that advocate for democracy and women's participation in the formal economy (Labour Department, 1998). This affirmation allows women to enjoy the same privileges and employment opportunities as men without being unfairly excluded from the labour market

According to Ramalekana and Mokgoroane (2024), the principle of non-discrimination is upheld in all African countries, with the South African Constitution specifically advocating gender equality at all levels. To further solidify this commitment to equality, the Department of Labour has introduced employment equity (EE) measures to combat workplace discrimination and support affirmative action. EEA compels larger

businesses to actively seek to advance people from designated groups (blacks, women, and disabled persons), such as ensuring their equitable representation and workplace opportunities (Thabethe, 2022). This legislative framework, which also includes the Labour Relations Act of 1997 and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997, aims to create access to a fair and just working environment where South African employees are protected from discrimination (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021).

Statista (2025) notes that a major issue concerning South Africa's unemployment rate is the ongoing gender disparity. Unemployment has consistently been higher among women than men, with women representing approximately 35.8% of the total unemployed population, compared to 31.5% for men, in the first quarter of 2024. For context, the unemployment rate is defined as the proportion of a country's labour force that is unemployed, encompassing those who are ready and capable to work but currently without jobs (Statistics South Africa, 2023b).

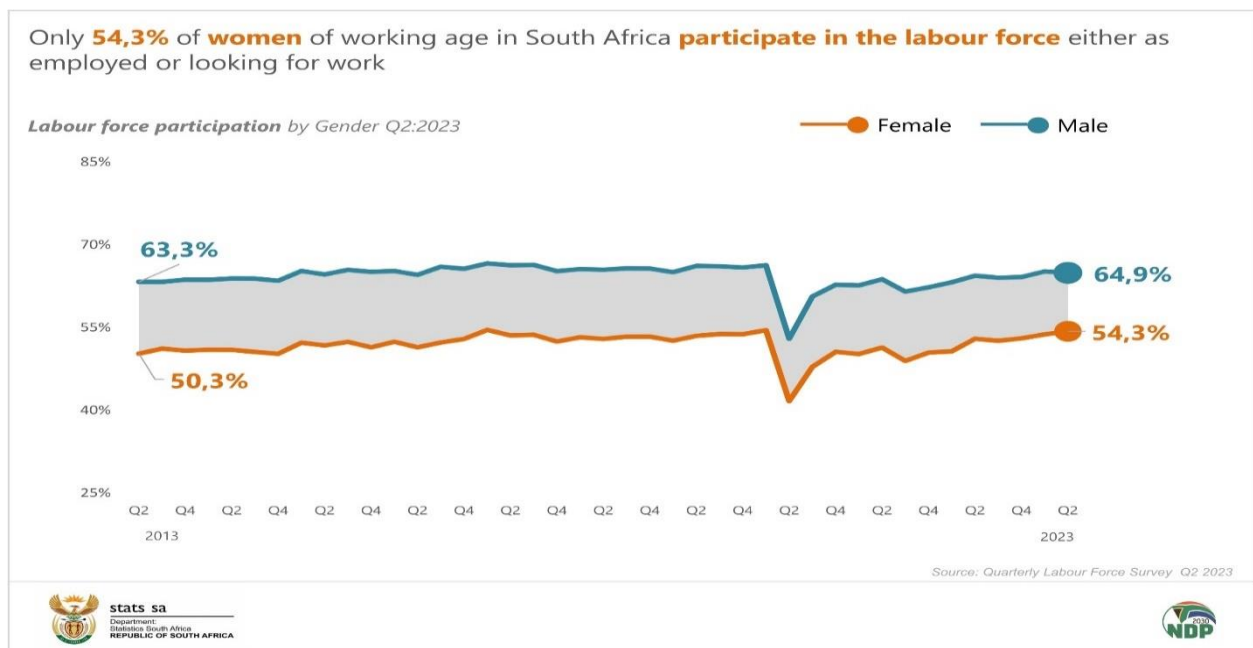


Figure 2.1: Quarterly labour force survey

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey Quarter 2:(Statistics South Africa, 2023b)

According to the labour force participation by gender study conducted by Statistics South Africa during the second quarter of 2023, gender disparities persist within the

labour market, particularly for senior positions (Figure 2.1) (Statistics South Africa, 2023b).

Mogoai et al. (2024) study indicates that certain women can successfully navigate the barriers to career advancement, demonstrating that the literature review considered a diversity of perspectives. Despite the adoption of gender equity policies by several organisations, their practical impact remains limited. This is often attributed to a process of decoupling, in which compliance with policy requirements is prioritised over genuine organisational transformation, and managerial resistance to equity goals undermines implementation (Williamson et al., 2020). As a result, policies are formally adopted but not effectively practised. While these challenges are examined in greater detail in the discussion that follows, it is important to briefly acknowledge them here, as they contribute to the persistent gap between the intended objectives of gender equity policies and their actual outcomes.

This differs from other settings, where effective implementation and innovative approaches, such as intersectional mentoring initiatives, integrated accountability mechanisms, or participatory policymaking, are needed. Hull et al. (2023) illustrate how integrated support structures and equitable leadership can support meaningful progress. Chikwe (2024) shows that locally driven gender strategies are often more responsive and sustainable.

2.4 PROPORTION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN APPOINTED IN TOP MANAGEMENT ROLES

The term "senior management" encompasses the highest echelon of executives within an organisation who are responsible for formulating strategic decisions that ultimately determine the overall trajectory and achievement of the company (Network Info, 2024). A senior management role involves enacting strategic determinations that impact the entire organisation, such as establishing long-term objectives, resource allocation, and risk management. Senior managers supervise diverse departments and functions, ensuring congruence with the company's vision (Alshwayat et al., 2023). Additionally, they are tasked with engaging stakeholders, nurturing connections, and representing the company's interests.

This role embodies leadership, as senior managers are not merely administrators but visionaries who galvanise and incentivise their teams (George, 2024b). They make pivotal decisions that steer the company's future and are responsible for its success. Their leadership methodology profoundly impacts the organisational culture, employee morale, and the company's performance (Anyigba & Lartey, 2024; Chirwa, 2025). According to Fonseca et al. (2022), leadership involves intentionally influencing others to provide guidance, structure, and support for activities and relationships within a group or organisation. Effective leadership includes exerting influence, guiding activities, making decisions, and creating a positive and productive environment for the group or organisation to thrive; consequently, the leader holds power and decision-making authority within an organisation (Chirwa, 2025).

Moodly (2024) contends that attaining leadership positions for women in South Africa remains challenging due to the prevailing assumption of women's marginalisation in influential roles. This assertion is supported by Hanna et al. (2023), who report that as of 2023, only 28.3% of senior positions in workplaces globally were held by women. Shava and Chasokela (2020) note that societal perceptions still largely regard women as followers rather than leaders. While this perspective is disheartening for South African women, it is unfortunately unsurprising given the male-dominated landscape of the country's political, social, cultural, and economic spheres (Vyas-Doorgapersad & Shava, 2022). Ultimately, South Africa, being a key economic force in Africa, will lose valuable leadership skills that could significantly contribute to the continent's development.

Moodly (2024) notes that, in South Africa and across Africa, achieving gender equity and expanding women's decision-making access in universities remains a significant challenge. This underscores the persistent barriers hindering women's progress in the workforce, particularly in executive positions, despite their academic accomplishments. While the CoJ reports that 41% of senior positions are held by women (CoJ, 2021a), this figure warrants deeper analysis within the context of the municipality's overall goals for gender representation and its potential impact on leadership effectiveness. While this percentage might appear relatively favourable compared to some global averages, it still falls short of parity. Moreover, research

suggests that even when women reach senior roles, their influence on decision-making and organisational direction can be limited if they remain underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership (Alshwayat et al., 2023).

This potential disparity in decision-making power could hinder the municipality's ability to fully benefit from diverse perspectives and experiences, potentially impacting on its effectiveness in addressing the needs of its diverse population. As Hanna et al. (2023) argue, a more balanced portrayal of women in posts of responsibility is crucial for creating a truly inclusive and effective leadership team, leading to better decision-making and improved organisational performance. Therefore, while the CoJ has made some progress, striving for greater gender balance in senior management is crucial to achieving its equality objectives and maximising its leadership potential.

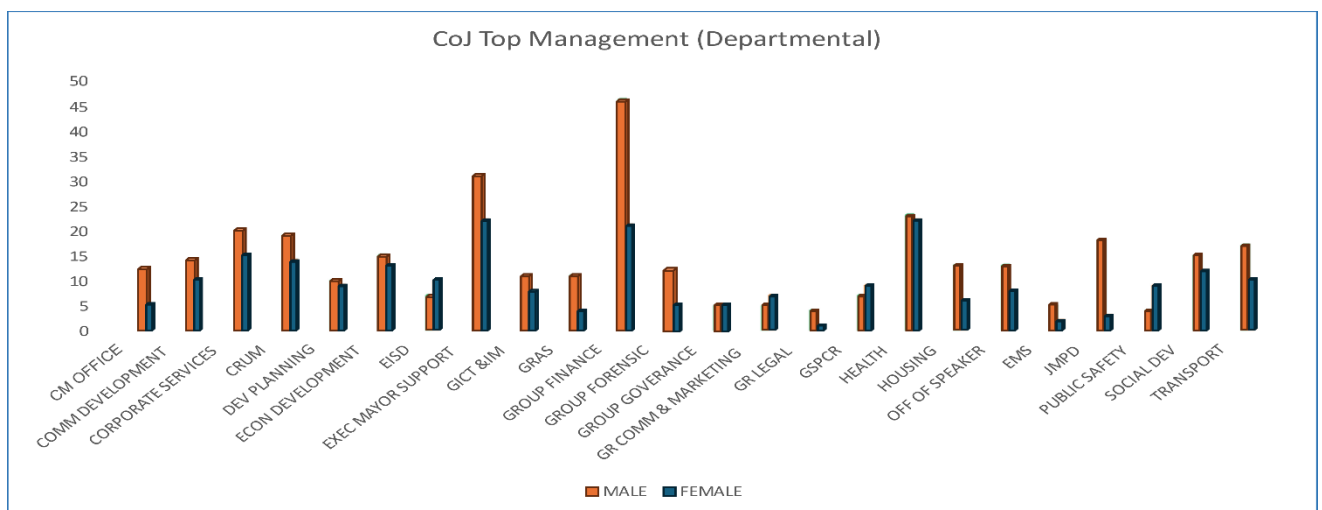


Figure 2.2: CoJ comparison of women vs men in senior management
Source: CoJ (2021a)

Table 2.1: Department acronyms

DEPARTMENT	EXPLANATION
CM	City Manager
CRUM	Customer Relationship and Urban Management
DEV PLANNING	Development Planning
EISD	Environment, Infrastructure Services Management
ECON DEVELOPMENT	Economic Development
EXEC	Executive
GICT & IM	Group Information Communication Technology and Information Management
GRAS	Group Risk and Assurance Services

DEPARTMENT	EXPLANATION
GR COMM	Group Communication
GR LEGAL	Group Legal
GSPCR	Group Strategy Policy Coordination and Relations
EMS	Emergency Management Services
JMPD	Johannesburg Metro Police Department
SOCIAL DEV	Social Development

Source: City of Johannesburg (2021)

The Parliament of South Africa's efforts to integrate women into the cabinet since 1996, as documented by the Parliament of South Africa, represent an important step towards gender inclusivity in government leadership (Chikwe et al., 2024). Furthermore, the acknowledgement by Bosch and Booysen (2021) of the strides made to improve gender participation in the workplace indicates positive progress. However, the persistent marginalisation of women in roles of management, as highlighted by, for example, Shava and Chasokela (2020), Shongwe (2024), and Hanna et al. (2023), calls for further scholarly attention and proactive measures to resolve the underlying hurdles hindering the progression of women in positions of authority in both public and private sectors.

Women hold a minority status in managerial roles within local government (Nelson and Piatak, 2021), and the obstacles faced by metro and local municipalities in achieving the 50-50 objective (Ndasana, 2022) underscore the immediate need to tackle this issue. Therefore, it is vital to implement targeted measures to encourage the recruitment, retention, and progression of women in their careers, create a supportive work environment, and address unconscious biases. These are essential steps to achieving gender equality in senior management (International Labour Organisation, 2023). This effort not only aligns with principles of equality and fairness but also has the potential to improve organisational effectiveness and better represent communities served through local government (Gurney et al., 2021). The findings emphasise the importance of ongoing efforts to foster gender equality and diversity in South Africa's professional landscape.

Table 2.2 presents the gender distribution of senior management positions in local government in Gauteng province, highlighting the proportions of male and female individuals occupying these influential and crucial roles.

Table 2.2: Gender composition of top management in local government across Gauteng

Municipality	Number of Senior Management Positions	Males	Females
City of Johannesburg Metro	18	12	6
Ekurhuleni Metro	24	18	8
Tshwane Metro	29	19	10
Emfuleni	9	6	3
Mogale City	10	8	2
Midvaal	6	5	1
Randwest	8	6	2

Source: Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (2022)

The underrepresentation of women in senior management positions is concerning in CoJ and in entities such as City Power and Joburg Water. For instance, City Power has 12 senior management positions, with only 3 occupied by women, while Joburg Water has 14 management positions, with 11 men and only 3 women. Similarly, in the Pikitup entity, out of 9 senior management positions, only 4 are occupied by females. This trend indicates a broader issue of gender disparity in technical fields within these organisations.

The inadequate representation of women in senior management at JRA, City Power, and Joburg Water may be attributed to several factors, including the relatively lower enrollment of women in STEM tertiary education (Makarem & Wang, 2020; Parmaxi et al., 2024). Other elements include socio-cultural influences (such as societal norms, cultural values, and traditions), an inadequate number of female role models, and underlying prejudice in professional and educational settings (de Siqueira et al., 2022). Moreover, while the human resource department may demonstrate an increased participation of women, the challenges women face in acquiring the technical expertise necessary for senior roles in STEM fields, such as engineering, cannot be overlooked (Dominguez et al., 2023).

To promote gender diversity and inclusivity within organisations such as the JRA, targeted interventions that address systemic barriers to women's advancement in STEM-related careers are crucial (Okafor & Okegbe, 2023). This may involve initiatives to boost female enrollment in STEM programmes at the tertiary level and the establishment of supportive, inclusive environments within organisations to facilitate the advancement of women into senior management positions (Dominguez et al., 2023).

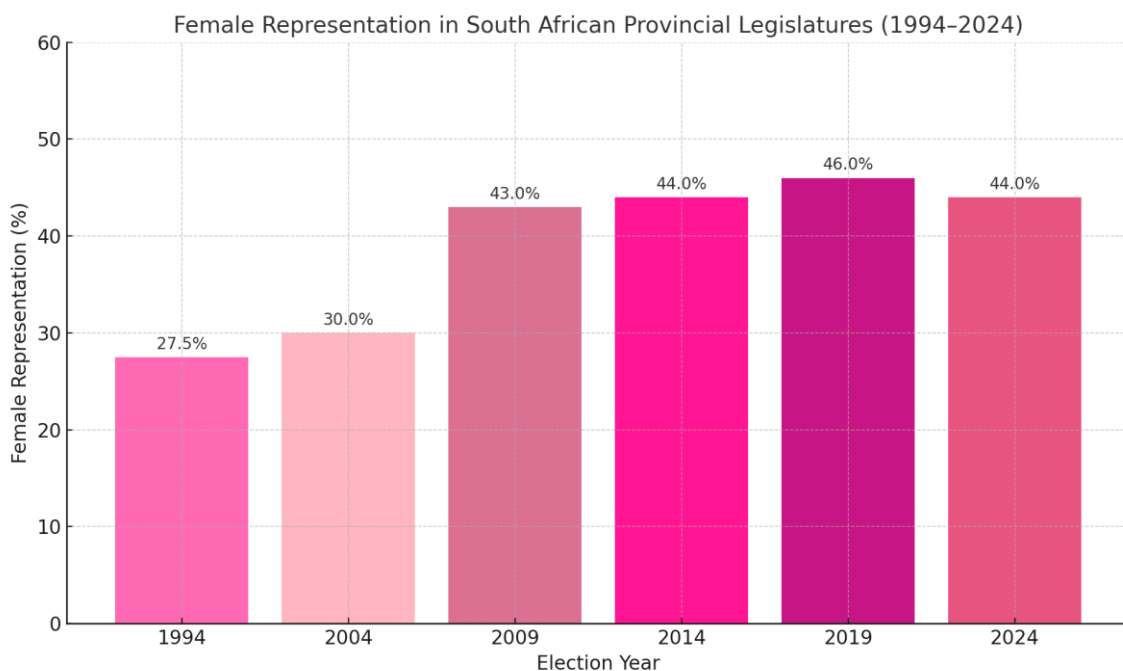


Figure 2.2: Gender balances in the provincial legislature

Source: Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (2022)

As indicated in Figure 2.3, the state-owned enterprises, public service, and private sector in South Africa still lag significantly in the engagement of women in executive positions. According to the South African Parliament (2024), female representation remains below 50% in positions with significant influence. This trend persists in more recent data as well. For example, the 2023 Commission for Employment Equity report shows that women hold only 33.7% of top management positions across various sectors (Department of Labour, 2019). Even within the private sector, women remain severely underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership. According to a 2020 report by PwC regarding the top 100 Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed

companies by market capitalisation, only 6% had female CEOs (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021). This stark reality underscores the critical need for interventions to address the persistent gender gap in leadership across sectors in South Africa.

A comprehensive understanding of gender distribution within specific departments and senior roles would require thorough investigation and access to internal data. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the hurdles systematically incorporated to impede the advancement of women in STEM careers and to implement targeted initiatives to promote gender diversity and inclusivity (Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

Despite considerable strides toward gender parity in the national cabinet, South Africa still grapples with disparities across various sectors, government-owned enterprises, and the public service. Statistical data from Statistics South Africa (2023b) underscores the significant underrepresentation of women in influential positions, with figures below 50% across several sectors. To comprehend the underlying reasons for this gender disparity, examining the educational landscape is pivotal. According to Census 2022, women in South Africa have almost reached parity with men in tertiary educational attainment; 13.1 % of women attained tertiary qualifications, compared to 13.3% of males, which is a substantial increase from 1996 when only 6.7% of females and 8.6% of males had obtained tertiary education (Statistics South Africa, 2023b). This suggests that the lack of qualified women is not the primary cause for their underrepresentation in high-level positions.

Although specific data on postgraduate completion rates by gender in South Africa is not readily available, statistics from the latest reports suggest that women constitute a significant proportion of postgraduate degree holders. According to Statistics South Africa (2022), women increasingly hold higher education qualifications, with 13.1% of females compared to 12.3% of males holding tertiary qualifications. This trend is reflected in the growth of master's degree completions, particularly in fields like business, economics, and management sciences, where women's representation continues to rise. However, challenges remain, especially in ensuring equity for students from low-income backgrounds (Statistics South Africa 2022).

Comparing South Africa's figures with those of other countries, particularly the Scandinavian nations known for emphasising gender equality, provides intriguing insights. In Norway, women hold 42% of board posts in public limited companies, surpassing the European average (Vyas, 2021). This underscores the feasibility of achieving gender parity in leadership positions and suggests that South Africa has room for improvement, given its current figures (Liani et al., 2021).

Therefore, attributing the exclusion of women in prominent positions solely to a deficiency of educational attainment oversimplifies the issue. Factors such as unconscious bias, societal expectations, and organisational cultures play significant roles. Addressing these systemic barriers requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing policy interventions, awareness campaigns, and proactive measures to advance gender heterogeneity in leadership. This approach fosters an environment in which women are empowered to excel in senior management positions in technical, traditionally male-dominated fields (Bridges et al., 2023).

2.5 THE APPOINTMENT, EMPOWERMENT, AND DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN AT JRA

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) establishes that South Africa has three spheres of government: national, provincial, and local. It further posits that the sectors of government are complementary, correlated, and different and must function as a single system of cooperative government to benefit the whole country. That is, each sector of the government shares the common objective of implementing the policies and laws outlined in the Constitution as established by the National Government. However, Thornhill (2009, 2015) argues that local and provincial governing bodies have distinct roles and responsibilities. Still, the main difference between the two is that while the provincial government is primarily concerned with legislative and executive powers, the local government is mainly focused on service delivery, policy development, and social and economic advocacy.

The JRA is a governmental entity operating under the jurisdiction of the Gauteng Provincial Government through the CoJ. Its primary mandate is to provide and maintain road infrastructure and services for the residents of Johannesburg. It is

considered male-dominated because its services concern traffic, road, and stormwater infrastructure, areas society views as meant for men (Bridges et al., 2023). The JRA was founded in 2001 and is run by a board of directors and a managing director who reports to the board (JRA, 2023b).

The JRA operates within a multi-layered governance framework, ensuring national and local objectives are aligned. Guided by the Constitution, the JRA upholds principles of equality and fair practices. The agency adheres to national and provincial laws, including the EEA and environmental legislation. In addition, the CoJ's specific transportation and infrastructure development policies are outlined in the Integrated Development Plan (CoJ, 2022b). This integrated approach fosters transparency and accountability, ensuring that the JRA's policies and procedures contribute to legal compliance and broader societal goals.

The CoJ has taken significant steps to promote gender equity and empower women within its entities and regulatory frameworks (CoJ, 2022b). As an entity of the CoJ, the JRA must adhere to these policies, including the Gender Policy Framework, and the Human Resources policy, which focuses on gender equality. The Gender Policy Framework provides guidelines to promote gender equality in human resource activities, such as recruitment, selection, promotion, training, and development, to eliminate biases and barriers that hinder women's advancement (Khonjelwayo & Zondi, 2025). While the JRA's existing policies address the development of women, there is a need for a more focused approach to women's empowerment. By prioritising women's empowerment, JRA can help create a more balanced and fair work environment, tap into a broader talent pool, and align with national and international efforts to achieve gender equality (CoJ, 2021a). This approach would address systemic barriers and biases and cultivate a diverse work setting, in line with effective global practices that advance diversity and participation.

The role of any organisation, including JRA, in empowering and retaining its female managers can be better understood through an analysis of HR hiring processes, starting from appointment through to development and retention (Abbas et al., 2025).

2.5.1 The appointment of women in leadership roles at JRA

JRA upholds the EEA and, through its policies, advocates for women in leadership positions. It prides itself on being EE-focused and promoting equality in its hiring activities in internal and external recruitment processes (JRA, 2023b). Vacancies are advertised internally and externally, and while everyone is welcome to apply, the positions are equity-targeted, and their advertisements state that preference will be given to females, including people with disabilities. Recruitment goes through the standard company processes of advertising, interviewing, vetting, and screening candidates, after which an offer is made (JRA, 2023b).

The organisation seeks to recruit well-qualified candidates from diverse study backgrounds, with a strong preference for those who have expertise in fields such as engineering, planning, architecture, supply chain, and trades (JRA, 2023b). The JRA's focus on technical expertise aligns with current research and best practices in road infrastructure management. It emphasises the importance of investing in human capital and technical skills development to achieve its strategic objectives, including enhancing road safety and network efficiency (Bykova et al., 2024). This mirrors the Permanent International Association of Road Congresses World Pavements (2023), which underscores the crucial role of innovation and technological advancements in addressing the challenges of the 21st century Crispino and Toraldo, (2023). These reports highlight the significance of technical professionals, such as engineers, planners, and other specialists, in fulfilling the JRA's mandate to provide safe and efficient road infrastructure for Johannesburg.

While other skills are valuable, technical expertise remains essential for successfully planning, designing, constructing, and maintaining the city's roads, particularly considering evolving technological and societal demands (JRA, 2023b). Therefore, from the inception of the recruitment drive, women have been underrepresented because male alumni from post-secondary education mainly dominate the agency's field of expertise (Nunes & Matete, 2023).

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2023), in 2018, the global average of women in engineering was 3%, whereas in

South Africa, the proportion was much lower at 1%. This disparity is attributed to various factors, including sociocultural barriers, a lack of female role models, educational inequality, and workplace challenges (Engineering Council of South Africa, 2022). Prejudices and customary roles impede girls from venturing into STEM-related careers, and the scarcity of female engineers can perpetuate this cycle (Arredondo et al., 2022).

Inequalities in access to quality STEM education further limit opportunities (Avolio and Chávez, 2023; United Nations Children's Fund, 2020), while discrimination and bias in the workplace can dissuade women from continuing in the field (Collier-Reed et al., 2023). Addressing these systemic issues is essential to increasing women's inclusion in South African engineering.

The JRA board is strongly committed to gender diversity and inclusion (JRA, 2023b). It suggests that the organisation values and promotes impartiality in the opportunities for women to attain leadership roles, and, in addition, seeks to diversify its decision-making processes and perspectives. This representation sets a positive example for other organisations, signalling a progressive approach to gender equality in the boardroom.

2.5.2 The development and the retention of female leadership at JRA

Empowering women is crucial for societal progress. Women's empowerment involves granting them the power and autonomy to participate in decision-making and leadership roles, and to access and control resources and opportunities. This also includes enhancing their economic and social status, promoting gender equality, and ensuring equal rights and opportunities in all spheres of life. According to Abbas et al. (2021), women's empowerment involves providing them with relevant skills, opportunities, and mentoring support. Furthermore, Canton (2021a) emphasises the centrality of motivating women to participate in development interventions.

JRA recognises the historical challenges women have faced in the engineering sector and is actively working to support their professional growth and progression within the organisation (JRA, 2022b). Although the specific number of female employees

meeting the qualifications and experience required for senior management roles is not explicitly stated, the JRA is dedicated to expanding its presence in executive roles. This dedication is evident in the JRA's employment equity targets, which aim to build a more diverse workforce aligned with South Africa's demographics (Bae, 2023).

The advancement of women in leadership is crucial for society's progress and long-term success. As Canton (2021a) noted, the development of women is essential for their sustained presence in leadership roles. This has been evident in South Africa, where several prominent women have demonstrated their competence and leadership prowess (Shongwe, 2024). These individuals serve as shining examples of women's immense leadership capabilities, and their accomplishments pave the way for further progress and empowerment for women across the globe.

The JRA recognises the crucial role of human resources in its operations, especially in critical areas such as road maintenance and academic advancement (JRA, 2021a). The agency has demonstrated a strong commitment to the training and development of its human resources for critical programmes such as road maintenance and advancement, with a focus on skills enhancement (JRA, 2023a). The 2021/22 Annual Report of the JRA highlights the prioritisation of academic rehabilitation and nurturing human resources to support its core objectives (JRA, 2023b). However, it is essential to note that the agency lacks specific systems for empowering women in leadership programmes. The budget plan 2021 does not emphasise the development of female talent, and the JRA's study subsidy, provided as a bursary to all its employees, is not specifically targeted at women or those in decision-making positions (JRA, 2021b). This raises concerns about the agency's efforts to promote gender diversity and inclusivity in its human resources development initiatives and advance female leadership.

Retention of employees is described as an establishment's capacity to inhibit the loss of more employees than those retained Gelencsér, (2023) which is crucial for long-term success. As Searing et al. (2023) note, retaining employees reduces recruitment and training costs while contributing to company stability, productivity, and innovation. This strategic investment in employee development and well-being can substantially improve efficiency and overall company performance. The JRA appears to have

achieved some success in retaining female managers, as evidenced by the fact that some have been with the organisation for over 20 years. However, it is unclear what specific efforts and investments the agency has made to support these women, such as providing mentoring, coaching, networking opportunities, or formal education programmes, all of which are recognised as key factors in promoting employee retention (Gannon et al., 2021). Further investigation is needed to understand the factors contributing to their long tenure and to identify potential areas for improvement in the JRA's approach to retaining female talent.

There are many strategies JRA can implement to empower, develop, and retain its esteemed female leaders. They can invest in management coaching, mentorship programmes, skills development, and promoting educational access (Adedeji, 2024; Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Mentoring is a development activity, particularly for newly appointed leaders in the field; its purpose is to groom an individual to fill a role by teaching proven methods and introducing the mentee to a system of contacts that will support their success (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Coaching involves one-on-one counselling of executives, leaders, and managers about work-related issues to develop leadership, as stated by (Pelález Zuberbuhler et al., 2020).

Networking often involves organising events where people gather and share information. This tool is helpful for women's development, as it involves diverse people with knowledge and skills (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021). It will need to involve external individuals in an organisation to extend the field of knowledge on a topic or field. When using academic development as an empowerment strategy, the agency should allow managers to upgrade themselves through academic education while working for the agency and give incentives for qualification completion and possibly pay progression (Bracken, et al., 2023). All these development and empowerment strategies will, in turn, improve the retention and development of female leaders at the JRA. Female leadership appointment, development, and retention positively impact both the leader and the entity (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021).

2.5.3 Policies aimed at female inclusion, development, and retention at JRA

JRA is guided by policies, guidelines, and programmes that promote gender representation and female development, particularly in managerial positions. As a public entity under CoJ, it should abide by national and municipal mandates that prioritise the inclusion and advancement of women in the workplace, particularly in sectors historically dominated by men, such as engineering and infrastructure. The Department of Labour (1998) highlights the significance of continuous learning and development for all employees, particularly women, through initiatives such as leadership programmes, internships, and skills development programmes. Additionally, the CoJ's gender policy (CoJ, 2021a) expressly advocates for gender parity and inclusion of women at every level of the organisation, including leadership roles. This commitment is further reinforced in the CoJ's Integrated Development Plan, which outlines targeted strategies to enhance women's workforce participation and support their advancement into leadership roles (CoJ, 2022b). The Plan suggests that the municipality's commitment is to promote women's participation and progression in the workforce. This plan provides a valuable framework for JRA to align its initiatives and strategies, leveraging the city's broader goals to drive organisational change.

Research has consistently shown that cultivating a gender-balanced workforce can drive innovation, improve decision-making, and enhance organisational performance. McCallaghan et al. (2020) found that effective diversity management positively influences employees' perceptions, highlighting how diverse teams contribute to creative solutions by offering varied perspectives. Similarly, Yarram and Adapa (2024) concluded that gender diversity in leadership roles not only promotes ethical decision-making but also improves financial performance, underscoring the importance of diverse leadership in fostering organisational success. Within this context, the JRA recognises that efforts to include, develop, and retain women are both a legal and ethical responsibility and a strategic necessity (JRA, 2021a). This preliminary examination sets the stage for a deeper exploration into the specific policies and initiatives JRA has implemented to address the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions.

2.5.3.1 Employment Equity Act

The EEA is a vital section of legislation designed to address the injustices of the previous apartheid system by encouraging fair treatment and equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of race, gender, disability, or other grounds (Carrim, 2022). The Act mandates that designated employers, including government entities such as the JRA, actively work towards achieving equitable representation of historically disadvantaged groups in all positions of employment, including the highest levels (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023b). This is also supported by the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003, which further encourages black economic empowerment and the advancement of women at work (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021). The EEA stipulations require designated employers to conduct regular workforce analyses to identify barriers to employment equity and to establish proactive measures to address discrepancies. These criteria may include targeted recruitment and selection processes, skills development programmes, and mentorship initiatives to facilitate career progression for individuals from designated groups (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023b). Research has shown that such affirmative action measures can effectively promote gender diversity in the workplace, even though some organisations do not implement it or respond to it positively (Posel & Rogan, 2019).

For the JRA, the EEA serves as a guiding framework for advancing the development and retention of female leadership (JRA, 2023b). By adhering to the Act requirements, the JRA must actively seek out and recruit qualified women for senior management positions, provide them with equal advantages for vocational development, and create an inclusive and encouraging work environment that supports their upward trajectory (JRA, 2023b). This includes addressing potential biases or discriminatory practices that hinder women's progress within the organisation, and implementing measures to ensure equitable access to training, mentorship, and promotion opportunities.

The EEA's emphasis on representation and inclusiveness aligns with the JRA's broader commitment to diversity and equity. By actively implementing the Act's provisions, the JRA can create a more diverse and representative leadership team

that better reflects the communities' demographics. This, in turn, can lead to improved decision-making, an enhanced innovation workplace culture that is diverse, that values and empowers women in leadership roles. Moreover, the EEA's focus on skills development and career advancement for historically disadvantaged groups aligns with the JRA's need for a highly skilled and competent workforce to fulfil its mandate (JRA, 2023b). JRA set up the Employment Equity Implementation Plan (2020/2021) to ensure this act is implemented. This plan investigates female empowerment in the organisation, ensuring that all recruitment for vacant posts accounts for at least 30% of females. By investing in developing female employees, the JRA can build a pool of talented leaders capable of overcoming the complex challenges of infrastructure development and management in the 21st century.

2.5.3.2 The Gender Policy of 2021

As part of the CoJ, JRA is guided by the CoJ Gender Policy of 2021 and is committed to promoting and sustaining female leadership. While not explicitly labelled as "staff development", the policy's focus on capacity building, empowerment, and training aligns seamlessly with the broader goal of fostering professional growth among women in the organisation (CoJ, 2021a). As a municipal entity, JRA is bound by this policy and recognises its strategic importance in achieving its operational objectives.

The capacity-building and empowerment principle enshrined in the CoJ Gender Policy directly informs the JRA's approach to developing its female workforce. This translates into tangible initiatives, including customised training sessions and mentorship opportunities, as well as leadership development workshops tailored to equip women with the abilities and expertise necessary to excel in their roles and aspire to leadership positions. By investing in the professional growth of its female employees, the JRA not only fulfils its obligations under the policy but also strengthens its capacity to attract and retain top female talent (JRA, 2023b).

Furthermore, the policy's strategic objective of institutional capacity building necessitates the JRA to cultivate a workplace culture that actively supports women's advancement. This entails raising awareness about gender equality issues, challenging unconscious biases, and fostering an inclusive environment where

women feel appreciated, honored, and motivated to share their distinctive thoughts and traits (CoJ, 2021). By actively promoting gender sensitivity and inclusivity, the JRA can provide a more friendly and helpful environment to female employees, increasing their retention rates and encouraging them to pursue leadership positions.

The CoJ's Gender Policy, which emphasises empowering women economically and politically, is directly reflected in the JRA's commitment to developing female leaders. The agency recognises that empowering women to take on leadership roles requires more than just providing training; it necessitates creating a supportive ecosystem where women can thrive. This includes addressing systemic barriers to women's advancement, such as unconscious biases and discriminatory practices, and providing women with the resources and support they need to succeed in leadership positions (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

2.6 PROGRAMMES AIMED AT FEMALE INCLUSION, DEVELOPMENT, AND RETENTION AT JRA

The JRA acknowledges the significant gender disparity within its workforce, with women comprising only 33% of the total workforce, despite constituting 45% of Gauteng's economically active population (JRA, 2021a). This underrepresentation is evident across all management levels, highlighting a systemic issue that necessitates targeted interventions. In response to this challenge, the JRA has set a goal to achieve at least 50% representation of women in decision-making structures by the 2023/24 period, which has not yet been accomplished. To support this objective, the agency has launched several programmes designed to foster an inclusive workplace environment, strengthen women's representation, and improve their development and retention, particularly in leadership roles. These initiatives reflect JRA's commitment to addressing gender inequality and creating a more equitable workforce.

One key initiative is the Gender Audit & Women's Book Project, launched in 2020/2021, which seeks to understand the factors influencing women's experiences at the JRA and identify areas for improvement (JRA, 2021b). This project involves investigating how women perceive their work environments, benefits, and

employment terms and conditions to develop actionable recommendations to enhance their workplace experience. The project will culminate in the publication of a "Book of Women for the JRA" showcasing the contributions of female employees and highlighting the agency's commitment to gender equality.

Another notable programme focuses on providing safe and dignified ablution facilities for women working on-site (JRA, 2022c). According to Roberson and Scott (2024), this initiative recognises the specific struggles women face in the field and aims to create a more inclusive and supportive work environment by addressing their specific needs.

While these efforts are commendable, the JRA still faces significant challenges in achieving gender parity within its workforce. The international deficit of women within fields such as STEM, which are crucial to JRA's core functions, poses a persistent hurdle in attracting and retaining qualified female talent (Statistics South Africa, 2023b). Additionally, entrenched gender biases and stereotypes within the broader societal and professional landscape continue to hinder women's rise to leadership positions.

2.7 BARRIERS TO THE EMPOWERMENT AND RETENTION OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP AT JRA

There are several bases for marginalising women in top management roles, which are briefly covered here.

2.7.1 Opportunities for development

Chalermchaikit et al. (2024) assert that human resource management practices lacking a gender lens are to blame for the inadequate presence of women in senior management roles. This argument aligns with HCT, which posits that individuals can enhance their productivity and career prospects by investing in their skills and knowledge through education, training, and work experience (Becker, 1994). However, Jansen van Rensburg (2021) and Barkhuizen et al. (2022) argue that this very principle can inadvertently hinder women's career advancement due to the

perception of their lower work commitment. This perception often stems from the traditional expectation that women are primarily responsible for family caregiving, leading to the assumption that they have less time and energy to dedicate to career development activities outside of working hours (Quarshie et al., 2023; Garach, 2024). This can result in women being excluded from training opportunities and overlooked for promotions, further reinforcing the gender gap in leadership.

2.7.2 Gender stereotype and prejudice

Akinlolu (2022) posits that the notion of gender stereotypes has been one of the biggest obstacles to women's career progress and personal growth. According to Wald et al. (2024), the concept of gender in leadership has sparked interest among prominent media personalities who historically perpetuated the idea of women's innate incapacity to lead. Contrary to these outdated beliefs, Hoyt and Simon (2011) argue that the narrative of female inferiority in leadership is factually false and serves to undermine the credibility of women in leadership roles. Successful leadership, as Hoyt and Simon (2011) highlight, requires a combination of traits traditionally associated with both men and women, such as emotional intelligence, risk-taking, empathy, loyalty, and the ability to inspire, empower, and uplift others. Therefore, it is crucial to challenge and debunk these gender stereotypes to create an appealing and progressive environment for women in managerial roles.

Akinlolu (2022) suggests that societal perceptions of women's traditional roles within households can influence their professional choices, including their willingness to pursue leadership positions. This indicates that women may face additional challenges or responsibilities in their personal lives that hinder their ability to fully commit to the demands of leadership roles. However, Akinlolu's research also shows that, despite these challenges, both men and women demonstrate equal dedication to their work and share similar aspirations for leadership. This finding challenges the assumption, put forth by Faniko et al. (2022), that women's perceived lower work commitment impedes their career advancement. The underrepresentation of women in prominent positions is not due to a lack of ambition or commitment, but rather the systemic barriers and societal expectations that disproportionately impact women.

Akinlolu's (2022) argument highlights the intricate reciprocity among gender roles, societal expectations, and, specifically, career choices, shedding light on the primary rationale for the exclusion of women from positions of power. It emphasises the need to address these systemic issues to create a fair workplace where men and women have equal opportunities to succeed and take on positions of authority (Hopkins & Ben-Hador, 2025). The conventional belief that childhood gender stereotypes strongly influence career choices and self-perception has been challenged by recent research. A meta-analysis by Cundiff et al. (2024) revealed that gender differences in preferences are generally small and often context-dependent, suggesting that stereotypes may not be as definitive as previously believed. This indicates that factors beyond early childhood experiences, such as individual interests, aptitudes, and economic opportunities, play a more significant role in shaping career paths for both men and women. While stereotypes and rigid gender roles can still pose challenges in the workplace (Rudman et al., 2021), the evolving understanding of gender differences suggests a more complex picture in which individual preferences and choices are not solely determined by early socialisation.

2.7.3 Impact of leadership instability on female leaders: Challenges and strategies for success at JRA

According to Timsina (2024), leadership instability is the frequent changes or turnover in leadership positions, whether in political or organisational settings. This instability can stem from various factors, such as political transitions, organisational restructuring, or individual career moves. The consequences of such instability can be far-reaching, affecting the individuals involved and the overall performance and well-being of teams, organisations, or even nations.

While some researchers, such as Rashid and Rashid (2024), emphasise the political dimension of leadership instability and its impact on national development, others, such as Koeswayo et al. (2024), focus on the organisational context and its implications for internal dynamics and performance. However, both perspectives agree that leadership instability disrupts continuity, leads to inconsistent policies or practices, and can negatively impact individuals and groups. In essence, leadership instability is a lack of steady, consistent leadership, manifesting in different forms and

contexts and ultimately posing challenges for those affected. It is a complex phenomenon with diverse causes and consequences, requiring a nuanced understanding to effectively address its negative impact.

Lack of continuity and the need to constantly adapt to new leadership dynamics can hinder the progress and development of female leaders, particularly those in the early stages of their careers (Jones et al., 2019). It is crucial to examine the specific impact of instability on female leaders and to identify strategies to empower them to navigate such environments. Frequent turnover among female leaders can significantly impact the development of future female leaders, as it creates a lack of consistent role models and mentorship opportunities. In many organisations, female leaders are often few, and their visibility in leadership roles is important for inspiring and guiding other women who aspire to similar positions (Paule & Yelin, 2022). When these leaders leave or face frequent turnover, it can be challenging for emerging female leaders to find mentors or models to emulate, which can slow their progression and confidence in navigating leadership dynamics.

Female leaders may face additional obstacles due to gender biases and stereotypes in some organisational cultures (Chikwe et al., 2024). The ability to effectively adapt to different leadership styles while maintaining authenticity and resilience is a prerequisite for female leadership to succeed in unstable leadership environments (Khanmalek, 2025). Research suggests that female leaders with strong emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills are better equipped to navigate instability and foster positive relationships with their teams (Consten, 2023).

To empower female leaders in the face of instability, organisations should invest in mentorship programmes and create supportive networks that provide guidance, resources, and opportunities for professional development (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021). Mentorship can be crucial in helping female leaders develop the skills and confidence needed to navigate the complexities of leadership transitions and adapt to new leadership styles (Dzingwa & Terblanche, 2024). Moreover, organisations should aim to cultivate values of inclusivity, where female leaders feel valued and driven to demonstrate their talents (Valerio 2022).

2.7.4 The STEM skills gap

The continued inadequate representation of women in STEM fields in post-secondary education is a major factor in the underrepresentation of women in top leadership roles within the JRA (Casad et al., 2021). This disparity in educational choices has a cascading effect, limiting the pool of qualified female candidates for technical roles that often serve as stepping stones to leadership positions within the JRA. The JRA acknowledges this challenge in its Annual Report 2021/22, stating that "it supports the notion of preferential treatment for previously disadvantaged, underrepresented groups in order to make their representation equitable. Males are over-represented in relation to the demographics of Gauteng" (JRA, 2022b, p. 13). This recognition highlights the need for targeted interventions to promote the increase of females choosing STEM careers while motivating women to pursue STEM education and careers, ultimately increasing the pipeline of qualified female candidates for leadership roles within the organisation.

Several studies, including those by Fajrina et al. (2020), Minarti et al., (2022) and Chan (2022), have highlighted a persistent gender disparity in STEM education. Women consistently enrol in STEM-related programmes at lower rates than men (OECD, 2017; Stoet & Gary, 2018). As a result, women are less likely to acquire the technical skills and knowledge required for key positions within the JRA, such as engineering and project management—roles that are essential for career advancement within the agency.

This educational gap translates into a limited talent pipeline for the JRA when seeking to diversify its leadership teams. With fewer women graduating with STEM degrees, the pool of potential female candidates for technical and leadership positions shrinks significantly. This scarcity of qualified women not only hinders the JRA's efforts to achieve gender parity in leadership but also deprives the agency of the unique viewpoints and talents that women contribute (Green & Hand, 2024).

To address this challenge, the JRA and broader South African society must actively encourage and support more women pursuing education and careers in STEM. This can be achieved through targeted initiatives, including mentorship programmes that

link female students with women working in STEM professions within the JRA, scholarships for women in STEM, and awareness campaigns that highlight the rewarding career opportunities available within the JRA and other infrastructure-related organisations (Mbanjo & Nolan, 2017). By bridging the STEM gap, the JRA can create a more diverse and inclusive talent pool, leading to an increase in the participation of women in leadership roles and creating a stronger, more innovative organisation.

2.7.5 The challenges facing women in senior leadership in South Africa

South Africa faces a silent crisis – the steady exodus of women from senior leadership positions (Motara, 2024). Despite concerted efforts to promote gender diversity in the workplace, women leaders are leaving their roles at an alarming rate, posing a significant threat to the country's progress towards gender equality and inclusive leadership (Motara, 2024). This startling trend demands a deeper exploration of the intricate challenges driving the silent exodus.

In South Africa, women in senior leadership positions often face a complex array of challenges that hinder their retention, despite progress in addressing initial barriers to entry. While more women are rising through the corporate ranks, they continue to confront systemic obstacles once they reach the top. One prominent example of these challenges is the "glass cliff," an extension of the glass ceiling concept. The glass cliff refers to the tendency for women to be disproportionately appointed to precarious executive roles during times of crisis, setting them up for failure and reinforcing stereotypes about women's leadership abilities (Al-Ansari, 2020; Ihmels et al., 2022). In South Africa, women CEOs have often been called upon to lead organisations during financially turbulent periods. For instance, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka's appointment as Deputy President in 2005, following the removal of President Thabo Mbeki, occurred during a period of significant political instability (Ndzendze, 2024). Although not a corporate example, her experience illustrates how women leaders are frequently tasked with managing crises, a scenario that often exposes them to heightened scrutiny and unrealistic expectations.

The lack of access to sponsorship and mentorship opportunities creates a disheartening environment where women's potential is stifled (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021). Pay disparity, despite women having comparable qualifications and experience, can be a significant demotivator and contribute to women leaving senior leadership positions.

Straying too far in either direction can lead to criticism and backlash, creating a challenge for women to define a leadership style that feels authentic while also meeting others' expectations and winning the respect of their colleagues. The additional burden of balancing work and family responsibilities, often compounded by societal expectations and a lack of supportive workplace policies (Susilowati et al, 2024), further exacerbates the challenges women leaders face, leading to burnout, disillusionment, and, ultimately, attrition.

2.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Grant and Osanloo (2014) define a theoretical framework as a blueprint for a study. This is not far from what Adom et al. (2023) say, as they explain that it is a foundation of research in which credibility is established. Adom et al. (2023) highlight that the researcher must consider the pre-existing theories, literature, and assumptions that inform one's research area. Grant and Osanloo (2014) advise that the topic, research area, and the purpose of the study should ideally inform the choice of theoretical framework—this study is underpinned by the HCT (Marginson, 2019). HCT provides the principal explanatory framework for interpreting participants' experiences and processes. Empowerment theory is incorporated in a complementary and contextual capacity to illuminate issues of agency, participation and enabling conditions; however, it is not employed as a standalone analytical framework.

2.8.1 Theory of human capital

HCT was developed by economist Gary Becker in 1964 and offers a framework for understanding the gender imbalances in leadership roles within organisations such as the JRA. According to HCT, individuals can improve their productivity and earnings through investments in education, training, and skill development (Becker, 1964).

This theory highlights that an individual's value to an employer is not solely based on inherent capabilities, but also the knowledge and skills acquired throughout their career (Schwab, 2015).

In the context of the JRA, HCT underscores the significance of investing in the professional development of female employees to enhance their leadership capabilities and potential. Women's career advancement may be hampered by unequal access to development opportunities and perpetuate gender disparities in leadership positions (Green & Hand, 2024). By providing targeted training programmes and mentorship opportunities, the JRA can equip women with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in positions of authority.

Furthermore, HCT underscores the importance of retaining skilled employees. The organisation loses valuable human capital if women leave the JRA due to a lack of development opportunities or an unsupportive work environment. Retaining and promoting female talent not only contributes to gender equity but also enhances the organisation's overall productivity and effectiveness. By cultivating an encouraging workplace culture that values diversity and provides equal growth opportunities, the JRA can attract and retain top female talent, ultimately strengthening its leadership pipeline and achieving its strategic objectives.

2.9 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

It is crucial to underpin research with a strong theoretical and conceptual framework. The theoretical framework provides a broader perspective and guides overall understanding, while the conceptual framework establishes the foundation for analysing specific concepts and illustrates potential relationships between them. As highlighted by Adom et al. (2023), these frameworks give the study precise insight and definition. For the specific study on women's empowerment, the conceptual framework of advancing women is particularly important. Therefore, a robust theoretical and conceptual framework is essential for the success and validity of research.

2.9.1 Women's empowerment

While HCT serves as the primary analytical framework for this study, empowerment theory provides complementary contextual insight into participants' experiences, agency, and engagement within the studied environment.

The women's empowerment framework developed by Priya et al. (2021) provides a valuable lens for analysing the JRA's efforts to promote gender equity. This framework highlights the interrelation of accomplishments, agency, and material in the empowerment process. Resources encompass access to essential assets like education, training, and financial capital, which are crucial for women's career advancement (Kabeer, 2023). Agency refers to women's ability to make choices and act, influenced by factors such as social norms and organisational culture (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). Achievements represent the outcomes resulting from empowered agency and access to resources (Kabeer, 2023).

Within this study, HCT is the dominant theoretical lens, particularly in explaining women's career progression and leadership development within the JRA, while empowerment concepts provide conceptual insight into the factors supporting women's leadership development and career progression within the JRA. HCT emphasises how crucial it is to invest in human capital, particularly through training and improvement of skills, to increase capacity as well as earnings potential (Becker, 1964). By combining HCT with the women's empowerment framework, we can see how investments in women's human capital can lead to increased resources, agency, and achievements, ultimately contributing to greater gender equity in leadership positions. This is particularly relevant in male-dominated sectors like infrastructure and engineering, where women often face additional barriers to advancement (Du Plessis & Barkhuizen, 2015).

Conceptual Figure 2.4 presents the application of HCT as the primary analytical framework, together with supporting empowerment concepts, within the context of the JRA. Increasing women's access to resources and strengthening their independence demonstrates how investments in training and skills development can empower women. This, in turn, can lead to greater achievements, such as increased

representation in leadership positions and improved organisational performance. Figure 2.4 additionally points out the responsibility of JRA-focused factors, namely, organisational culture, policies, and practices, in facilitating or hindering women's empowerment and career advancement. For example, a supportive organisational culture that values diversity and inclusion can significantly impact women's agencies and their ability to achieve their full potential (Ng & Sears, 2020).

According to Holbeche (2022), this approach aligns with the principles of HCT, which emphasise the value of human capital to maximise organisational performance and achieve strategic goals (Rajest et al., 2023).

Figure 2.4 is an illustration of how the conceptual framework of women's empowerment and HCT are connected.

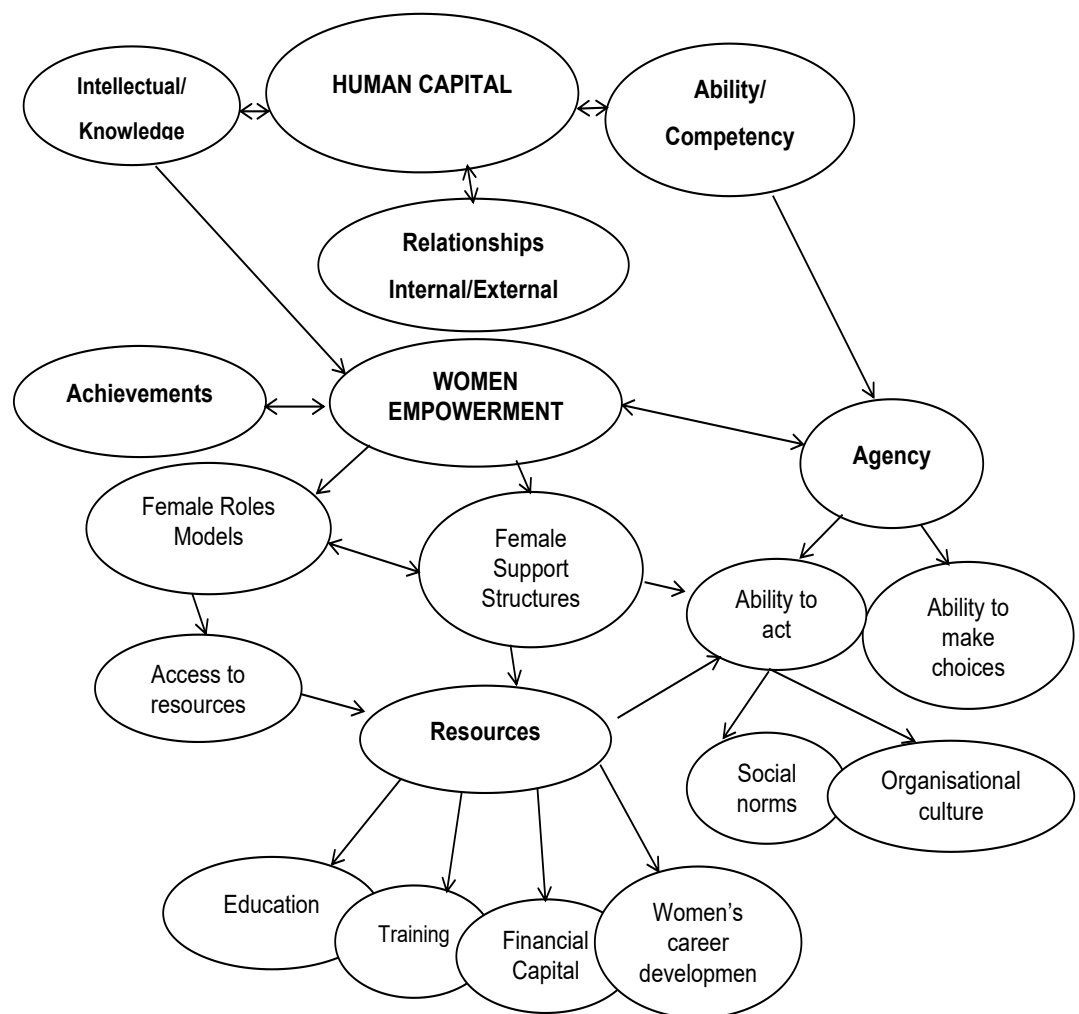


Figure 2.4: Conceptual diagram

Source: Author's own construction

HCT states that people's skills, knowledge, experience, and characteristics are assets that may be invested in to boost productivity and economic benefits. The framework's essential components are outlined below:

1. **Female role models:** Female role models serve as a non-physical asset, which has an impact on the development of human capital amongst women. They provide inspiration, practical examples and behavioural models for managing professional contexts, especially in the male-dominated industries.
2. **Female support structures:** The creation and usage of human capital are made possible by support structures (such as women's club peer groups, mentorship networks and official institutional policies).
3. **Education and Training:** Investing in formal education and training allows people to gain skills, knowledge, and experience. These investments build human capital by increasing individual productivity and employability.
4. **Health and Well-being:** A healthy workforce is more efficient. Investing in health, such as access to healthcare or nutrition, improves people's ability to work efficiently and reduces absenteeism, thereby increasing overall productivity.
5. **Skills and Knowledge:** Skills developed through education, experience, and learning have a direct impact on a person's capacity to accomplish tasks and solve difficulties at work. Higher skill levels often lead to greater earning potential.
6. **Intellectual Knowledge/Experience** As people gain expertise in their profession, they develop more refined abilities and a better understanding of their work, which can lead to higher productivity and job performance.
7. **Organisational Culture/Workplace Environment:** The physical and cultural environment in which workers operate has an impact on their human capital. A great work environment, supportive leadership, and possibilities for advancement can all contribute to enhanced motivation and productivity.
8. **Ability to Innovate and Adapt (making choices and ability to act):** The ability to innovate, adapt to new technologies, and solve issues is an essential component of human capital. People who can quickly adapt to change add value to firms by keeping them competitive in the market.

The elements in the conceptual model are linked and support one another, promoting individual and social growth. A conceptual model for supporting women in leadership within the JRA can be informed by the intersection of HCT and the women's empowerment framework. According to this model, resources (education, training, mentorship, and networking opportunities) lay the foundation for agency (women's ability to make choices and act), which in turn drives achievements (increased representation in leadership positions and improved organisational performance) (Griffen, 2024). Literature suggests that organisational culture, leadership commitment, and social norms play a crucial role in facilitating or hindering the translation of resources into actionable outcomes (Rafid, 2023).

2.10 CONCEPTUAL ALIGNMENT OF THE STUDY

Table 2.3 presents the alignment matrix used to demonstrate the coherence and integration of the study. The matrix illustrates the relationship between the theoretical framework, research objectives, research questions, interview questions, coding categories, themes, interpretation of findings, and recommendations. This alignment establishes the “golden thread” of the study by showing how HCT and empowerment concepts inform one another.

Table 2.3: Alignment matrix demonstrating the “golden thread” of the study

Human Capital Theory conceptual dimension	Research objective	Research question	Sample interview question(s)	Coding categories	Themes/sub-themes	Interpretation	Recommendation
Skills development and training	Examine factors obstructing the development and retention of executives at JRA	What factors obstruct women's development and retention in SMP at JRA?	What factors hinder women's career growth and retention at JRA?	Career development barriers; leadership instability; organisational culture	Career development: Lack of stability in leadership; social conditions in the workplace; lack of programmes tailored for women	Limited access to structured training reduces women's ability to build human capital for senior roles	Introduce structured, continuous development programmes specifically for women
Career development opportunities	Examine factors obstructing the development and retention of executives at JRA	What factors obstruct women's development and retention in SMP at JRA?	What support exist for women's professional growth at JRA?	Mentorship; training opportunities; professional support systems	Career development: Women mentorship programmes	Mentorship and targeted developmental support are necessary for strengthening women's leadership capacity and retention	Introduce formal mentorship and coaching programmes for women in senior management

Human Capital Theory conceptual dimension	Research objective	Research question	Sample interview question(s)	Coding categories	Themes/sub-themes	Interpretation	Recommendation
Gender representation in leadership	Identify women's challenges when appointed to senior management positions at JRA	What are the challenges women face in being appointed to senior management positions in JRA?	What challenges do women experience when entering senior management roles?	Gender inequality; workplace discrimination; representation gaps	Gender disparity: Male dominated industry. Lack of female leadership and representation. Gender disparity and women self-agency needs	Women continue to experience systematic barriers linked to underrepresentation and organisational gender inequality	Strengthen gender equity and leadership representation policies.
Organisational policy and support systems	Identify women's challenges when appointed to senior management positions at JRA	What are the challenges women face in being appointed to senior management positions in JRA?	How effective are organisational policies in promoting women into leadership positions?	Policy implementation; inclusion; participation in leadership	Gender disparity: Fair policy implementation. Limited policy for women. Lack of policy implementation	Existing policies are perceived as inadequately implemented, reducing women's opportunities for advancement and empowerment	Improve implementation and monitoring of gender transformation policies

Human Capital Theory conceptual dimension	Research objective	Research question	Sample interview question(s)	Coding categories	Themes/sub-themes	Interpretation	Recommendation
Work-life balance and social roles	Investigate how women's roles affect the advancement and retention of women in senior management positions at JRA	How do women's social roles affect their development and retention in senior management positions at JRA?	How do family and social responsibilities influence your career progression?	Work-life balance; family responsibilities; role conflict	Gender disparity: balancing work and family	Women's dual social and professional responsibilities affect career progression and retention in senior leadership roles	Introduce flexible work arrangements and family-supportive HR policies
Organisational support and employee retention	Recommend HR strategies to facilitate integration, development and retention	What HR strategies can be recommended to facilitate the integration and support of	What organisational strategies would improve women's advancement	HR support systems; employee empowerment; development strategies	Support structures: Assistance with studying. Career development/training. A platform to be heard.	Women's retention and advancement improve when organisations invest in both development and	Implement integrated HR strategies focusing on empowerment, education support, leadership development and employee voice.

Human Capital Theory conceptual dimension	Research objective	Research question	Sample interview question(s)	Coding categories	Themes/sub-themes	Interpretation	Recommendation
	of women in senior management positions at JRA	women in senior management positions within JRA?	and retention at JRA?			opportunities and inclusive support systems.	
Leadership development	Recommend HR strategies to facilitate integration, development and retention of women in senior management positions at JRA	What HR strategies can be recommended to facilitate the integration and support of women in senior management positions within JRA?	What changes are needed to improve women's advancement into leadership roles?	Strategic development; equal opportunity structures.	Strategy for development: Gender disparity in job roles. Limited opportunities for women	Unequal access to leadership opportunities limited the development of women's human capital within the organisation	Create equitable recruitment, promotion and succession planning strategies for women.

Source: Researcher's own source (2026)

2.11 CONCLUSION

This chapter outlines the potential hindrances to the development and conservation of women in senior management positions at JRA. It identifies unequal access to skills and development opportunities, as well as a lack of funding and targeted programmes, as significant obstacles to women's development. These barriers are crucial to understanding the challenges women face when advancing their careers within the organisation.

The chapter explored the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpin the study of the liberation of women and gender imbalances in leadership positions within organisations, specifically the JRA. The chapter begins by highlighting the HCT and its relevance to understanding gender imbalances in leadership positions. It emphasises the significance of investing in the professional development of female employees to enhance their leadership capabilities. Additionally, the chapter introduces Kabeer's (2023) women's empowerment conceptual framework, which examines the materials' dimensions, agency, and accomplishments from the perspective of the JRA's efforts to promote gender equity (Kabeer, 2023).

The chapter also discusses the importance of underpinning research with theoretical and conceptual frameworks, emphasising that they provide precise insight and guide the overall understanding of the study. It stresses that these frameworks offer a broader perspective and establish the foundation for analysing specific concepts. Moreover, the chapter underscores the relevance of these frameworks to the study, offering comprehensive insight and definition necessary for its success and validity.

In conclusion, research on women's progression into senior management positions, including insights from Kumar et al. (2023) and the JRA (2023b), highlights the importance of mentorship and leadership development programmes for career growth. At the same time, this literature survey has found that there are different perspectives on this topic, with Kumar et al. (2023) emphasising flexible work arrangements as a key factor for retention, while the JRA (2023) notes that without consistent leadership, such arrangements have a limited effect, and JRA evidence indicates that systemic barriers often outweigh these initiatives. Both sources,

however, agree on the need for strong organisational support and enforcement of policies that promote gender equity. These findings guided the current study by stressing the importance of examining both institutional structures and targeted interventions in supporting women in senior management at the JRA.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the research methodology, addressing the research design, sampling methods, data analysis, and ethical considerations, all of which were carefully implemented to ensure the study's objectives were achieved. The study aimed to answer the following research questions: What factors hinder the development and retention of women in senior management positions at JRA? What challenges do women face in securing senior management roles within JRA? How do women's social roles influence their development and retention in senior management positions? Finally, what HR strategies can be recommended to support and facilitate the integration of women into top management roles at JRA?

The first part of the chapter focuses on the research design used. The succeeding sections delve into the sampling, data collection techniques, instruments utilised, and the data analysis conducted for the study. In academic research, discussing various aspects of the study, including feasibility, positionality, validity, limitations that hindered the study's progress, and the ethical considerations applied, is vital. A thorough discussion serves as the basis for conducting the study, enabling readers to grasp the study's context and extent (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, academic researchers must engage in critical self-reflection and offer transparent information to guarantee the credibility and dependability of their research.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

The present study is based on the constructivism paradigm. As the data collected from participants is inherently subjective, it is crucial to investigate their unique viewpoints and opinions. According to Adom et al. (2023), the constructivist philosophical paradigm proposes that individuals construct their understanding and knowledge of the world by actively participating in experiences and reflecting on them. Therefore, this research study aimed to comprehend the world from the participants' subjective perspective, making the paradigm suitable for the study. The constructivist

paradigm was selected because this study focuses on how women in senior management at JRA interpret and make sense of their everyday experiences, challenges, and social roles. These are issues that cannot be meaningfully understood through purely objective methods. This paradigm is fitting as it creates space to explore the specific, context-bound realities that influence women's advancement and retention, so it aligns closely with the study's qualitative and experience-driven focus.

To meet the study's objectives, qualitative data collection methods, particularly semi-structured interviews, were employed to gather detailed and insightful information (Henriksen et al., 2022). Conducting individual interviews using this technique provided flexibility for the researcher to delve deeper into participants' responses and gather a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives and experiences. This approach facilitated a more organic flow of conversation, enabling the participants to express their thoughts in a way that suited their communication. The researcher used online meetings via Microsoft Teams, and the recording tool on this app to capture the responses of the participants.

This study's constructivist paradigm and qualitative data collection techniques provided a framework for exploring the complex relationship between policy and reality of the female leadership crisis in the workplace. By adopting a subjective perspective and employing in-depth data collection techniques, this study sought to provide valuable insights into this critical issue.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design refers to the detailed plan or framework a researcher develops to guide the entire study. It outlines the methods for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, ensuring that the research questions are answered systematically and validly (Bryman, 2021). The design includes decisions about the type of research approach (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods), the selection of participants, and the techniques for gathering data, such as interviews, surveys, or observations (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, it specifies how the data will be analysed and interpreted, aiming to produce reliable and meaningful results (Babbie 2020). This

structured approach ensures that the study's objectives are achieved efficiently and rigorously.

3.3.1 Research strategy

Research strategy refers to the general approach or plans a researcher adopts to address the research questions and achieve the study's objectives (Babbie, 2020). It encompasses the overall methodology and the specific steps taken to gather and analyse data. A research strategy is shaped by the type of research being conducted, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, and it guides how the researcher approaches data collection, sampling, and analysis (Bryman, 2021). It is closely linked to the research design, as the strategy outlines the overarching framework within which the design is implemented. The chosen strategy provides direction for the study, ensuring that the methods and tools used are appropriate for the research goals (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The strategy also reflects the philosophical stance of the researcher, influencing decisions on methodology and data interpretation (Babbie, 2020).

3.3.1.1 Qualitative research

The research strategy for this study was qualitative research. Creswell and Creswell (2017) define qualitative research as an interpretative approach that seeks to gain insight into the reasons behind people's experiences. This resonates with the notion by Babbie (2020), who argues that a qualitative research approach allows the researcher to examine phenomena in detail. Additionally, in qualitative studies, researchers collect rich data, often through in-depth interviews or observations, to develop themes and patterns that answer the research's "what" and "why" questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study used qualitative research design to achieve its objective (Busetto et al., 2020).

A qualitative research approach was applied because it allows an exploratory angle to continue probing until data gets to a point of saturation. According to Von Klinggraeff et al. (2024), exploratory research is particularly suitable for investigating unfamiliar issues where the researcher has limited prior knowledge. Similarly, topics

such as development, retention, and female leadership are still underexplored, undervalued, and insufficiently studied. Therefore, the qualitative approach allowed the researcher to delve deeply into these understudied areas and to obtain a full understanding of the complexities involved in development, retention, and female leadership. Furthermore, the qualitative design is suitable for a nuanced exploration of the subject matter, allowing the researcher to capture the intricate nuances and perspectives that quantitative methods may have missed.

A qualitative design can be beneficial in addressing and uncovering new knowledge behind the development and retention of female leadership at JRA because this approach presents flexibility in examining various questions and providing insights into individual problems or issues (Parks & Hayman, 2024). Moreover, it is suitable when a researcher does not know what to expect from the research and seeks to develop new information that will address the challenge introduced by the study.

When individuals share their experiences on a particular topic, the potential for knowledge to be uncovered is limitless. Qualitative research can gather a large amount of information in a short amount of time. However, researchers are aware of the limitations associated with this design, such as its specificity to a particular context, making it difficult to generalise findings (Smith, 2018). Despite the drawbacks, it was the best approach for this research, as it provided detailed answers to the question of the processes involved in developing senior female managers, as well as their development and retention at JRA.

3.3.2 Case study

A case study is a research approach that involves a detailed and in-depth exploration of a specific instance, event, or phenomenon within its real-life context. It is particularly effective in understanding complex issues where the boundaries between the context and the phenomenon are not clearly defined. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), a case study provides a holistic understanding of the subject by examining it through multiple lenses, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. This method is valuable for answering "how" and "why" questions and is particularly suited to exploring contemporary issues in real-world settings

(Annamalah, 2024). The strengths and weaknesses of multiple case studies research are provided in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Strengths and weaknesses of multiple case studies research

Strengths	Weaknesses
In-depth Analysis	Limited Generalisability
Real-World Application	Subjectivity and Bias
Flexibility	Time-Consuming
Contextual Understanding	Complexity
Holistic Approach	Focus on Qualitative Data

Source: Adapted from Annamalah (2024)

A case study was chosen for this study due to its ability to provide an in-depth analysis of a complex issue within its real-world context. By focusing on a specific subject, the case study allows for a detailed exploration of all relevant factors, offering a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Its flexibility enabled the use of various data-collection methods tailored to the case's unique needs, ensuring a thorough examination. Moreover, the case study's holistic approach ensured that all aspects of the subject were considered, providing insights that were not only contextually rich but also directly applicable to real-world situations. This approach was crucial in addressing the specific research questions and ensuring meaningful, actionable findings.

In this study, several strategies were employed to address the common weaknesses of case study research. To overcome the issue of limited generalisability, comparisons were made with similar case studies in the literature to identify patterns and insights that could extend to other settings. Subjectivity and bias were minimised by triangulation, gathering data from diverse sources such as interviews, observations, and documents to ensure a well-rounded perspective. To tackle the time-consuming nature of case study research, a structured timeline and focused approach were established, ensuring efficient data collection without compromising depth. The complexity of analysing qualitative data was managed through a clear coding system using Atlas.ti twenty-three, which helped organise and identify key themes systematically. Since the study relied solely on qualitative data, primarily from

semi-structured interviews, this approach allowed for rich, detailed insights while avoiding the limitations of quantitative data collection. These strategies ensured that the research was rigorous and manageable and that the results were applied to broader contexts.

3.4 RESEARCH SETTING

Research setting refers to the physical, social, or organisational context in which a study is conducted. It includes the location, environment, and specific conditions that may influence the data collection process and the research outcomes. The setting provides important contextual information that helps understand the relevance and applicability of the study's findings (Clark et al., 2021). In qualitative research, the setting can also include the organisational or cultural environment in which the participants operate, which helps to frame the research topic and guide the analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The research setting plays a crucial role in shaping the interaction between the researcher and participants and the study's overall findings (Babbie, 2020).

For this study, the setting was the JRA offices, located in the central business district of Johannesburg. The research focused specifically on the retention and development of senior management within the organisation. Including the setting is important because it provides context for the challenges and opportunities JRA faces in managing its senior leadership. The setting is particularly relevant, as JRA is an organisation with specific management structures, organisational challenges, and developmental needs, all of which were crucial to understanding how senior management was retained and developed within this organisational environment. Understanding the setting enabled the study to offer tailored insights that might not have been applicable in other organisational contexts.

3.4.1 The role of the researcher

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is central and multifaceted, involving not only the gathering and analysing of data but also interpreting meaning, context, and human experiences. The researcher engages directly with participants through

interviews to gather rich descriptions of experiences, perceptions, and social phenomena (Knott et al., 2022). Establishing rapport is crucial to ensure that participants feel comfortable sharing personal information (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2009).

The researcher interprets the data by identifying patterns and themes and situating these findings within a broader social or cultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Charmaz, 2014). Reflexivity is key, with researchers reflecting on how their own biases may shape the research process (Finlay, 2002). Data analysis involves systematic coding techniques to break down large amounts of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and researchers ensure ethical considerations, including obtaining informed consent and protecting anonymity (Orb et al., 2001). Moreover, the researcher may act as an advocate for marginalised voices, faithfully representing participants' lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Mertens, 2010). Once the data is analysed, findings are disseminated in a way that makes them accessible and meaningful to the intended audience (Creswell, 2014).

In this research, the researcher applied these roles by creating an open, non-judgmental environment for interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences freely. For analysis, Atlas.ti 23 was used to organise and code data systematically, with an independent coder reviewing the themes to ensure reliability. Throughout the study, the researcher remained aware of my biases, ensuring the findings reflected participants' perspectives. Ethical considerations were a priority, with informed consent obtained and anonymity maintained. This approach not only deepened the understanding of the research topic but also ensured the research was ethically sound.

3.4.2 Population

The population in research refers to the entire group of individuals, items, or phenomena that share specific characteristics relevant to the study's objectives. It is the larger group that the researcher aims to understand or infer about from the collected data (Hossan, 2023). The population is typically defined by specific criteria, such as geographic location, demographics, job roles, or other factors pertinent to the

research questions. Once the population is defined, the researcher may select a sample, which is a subset of the population, to gather data that can be generalised to the broader group (Neuman, 2021).

The population for this study consisted of women employees at JRA, particularly those in mid-level or aspiring to senior management positions, senior management members (both male and female), and HR professionals. Women in mid-level or entry-level roles were included to explore the barriers they face in advancing to senior management, as they are directly impacted by these challenges. Senior management members, both male and female, were included to understand the organisational dynamics and perceptions regarding women in leadership roles. HR personnel were selected because they play a critical role in recruitment, promotion, and retention policies, which can either facilitate or hinder women's progression. This diverse population allows for a comprehensive understanding of the internal and external factors that affect women's development and retention in senior management positions at JRA.

3.4.3 Sampling

Sampling in research refers to the process of selecting a subset of individuals, items, or data from a larger population to participate in a study. The goal of sampling is to select participants or units that are representative of the broader population, enabling the researcher to infer or draw conclusions about the entire population from the sample. There are various sampling techniques, including probability sampling, where each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected, and non-probability sampling, where selection is based on specific criteria or characteristics (Creswell, 2014; Stratton 2023). In qualitative research, purposive sampling is often used, selecting participants who can provide rich, detailed, and relevant information on the research questions (Cash et al., 2022; Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022).

3.4.3.1 Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling is a popular and advantageous method in academic research, especially in qualitative design. It involves selecting participants based on specific criteria, enabling researchers to obtain a targeted sample that provides valuable insights. Subedi (2023) explains that purposive sampling is employed in qualitative research to achieve an in-depth understanding of intricate social phenomena. Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024) describe purposive sampling as the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the topic of interest. Given the qualitative nature of the research, a purposive sampling method was selected for this study. Like other research methods, purposive sampling has strengths and weaknesses, as outlined in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Purposive sampling strengths and weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
Targeted selection of relevant participants	Limited generalisability
Rich, in-depth insights	Researcher bias in selection
Efficiency in data collection	Non-representative sample
Flexibility and adaptability	Subjectivity in participant criteria
Ideal for small, specialised groups	Limited range of perspectives

Source: Own source and customised from Creswell (2014, p. 158)

The researcher took several steps to mitigate the weaknesses of purposive sampling in this study. To counteract researcher bias in participant selection, the criteria for inclusion based on relevant roles and experiences and cross-checked my choices with my supervisor to ensure objectivity was clearly defined. Recognising the limitations of non-generalisability, the focus was on providing rich, context-specific insights from JRA, while acknowledging the study's scope and the inability to generalise the findings broadly. To address the potential issue of a non-representative sample, the researcher ensured a diverse selection of participants, including women at various senior management levels and HR personnel, thereby capturing a broader range of perspectives. To address the potential issue of a non-representative sample, a diverse selection of participants was ensured by including women at various senior management levels and HR personnel, thereby capturing a broader range of perspectives. Lastly, to mitigate the risk of narrow perspectives, in-

depth interviews were conducted with participants with diverse experiences, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the challenges women face in leadership roles. These steps helped address the inherent limitations of purposive sampling while maintaining a meaningful analysis.

The study sample comprised purposively selected JRA employees occupying managerial and senior organisational roles relevant to women's leadership development and retention. Participants included women in senior management positions, male managers, and relevant HR personnel whose professional responsibilities and organisational experiences provided meaningful insight into leadership progression, workplace barriers and organisational support systems affecting women in leadership positions. Identifying potential participants involved close collaboration with relevant department heads and managers at JRA, ensuring that the selection criteria and ethical standards were maintained. The study complied with the Protection of Personal Information Act to safeguard participants' data. All potential participants were provided with a comprehensive information sheet detailing the study's objectives, methods, and potential benefits and risks (Karunarathna et al., 2024). Those who showed interest were then given informed consent forms to review and sign, ensuring their voluntary participation.

3.4.3.2 Sample size

In research, sample size refers to the number of participants or units included in a study. The appropriate sample size is often determined by the study design, research goals, and analysis method. For qualitative studies, sample sizes tend to be smaller than quantitative research because the focus is on obtaining in-depth insights and rich data rather than statistical generalisation. Qualitative studies typically use purposive or theoretical sampling to select participants who can provide valuable insights into the research questions (Creswell, 2014).

For this study, the initial sample size was set at 15 participants. However, three participants withdrew, leaving a final sample size of 12. The final sample comprised both female and male participants, with women constituting most participants due to the study's primary focus on women's development and retention in senior

management positions. Male participants were included to provide complementary organisational perspectives regarding organisational barriers, leadership development, and support mechanisms affecting women in leadership roles. This sample size was justifiable for a qualitative study, as qualitative research values depth over breadth. Data saturation occurs when additional interviews yield no new information or themes, indicating that the data adequately represent the range of participants' experiences (Mannan 2024). In this study, data saturation was reached with 12 participants, supporting the appropriateness of the sample size for a detailed qualitative investigation. According to Patton (2022), qualitative studies typically involve smaller sample sizes because they aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and insights. With 12 participants, the study still allowed for a rich and detailed exploration of the factors influencing women's development and retention in senior management roles at JRA. The smaller sample size enabled the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews and analyse complex, contextual data, hallmarks of qualitative research.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION

Data collection is the process of systematically and systematically gathering and measuring information on variables of interest to answer research questions, test hypotheses, or evaluate outcomes (Creswell, 2014). In this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative research method in which the researcher uses a set of predefined questions while allowing participants to elaborate on their answers, providing richer insights into their experiences and perspectives (Bryman, 2021).

3.5.1 Semi-structured Interviews

The researcher collected participants' data primarily using semi-structured interviews (Belina, 2023). This approach was chosen for its potential to yield rich, in-depth qualitative data that can illuminate participants' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences (Alviar & del Prado, 2022). While semi-structured interviews have been lauded for their flexibility and ability to foster rapport, allowing for a deeper exploration of complex topics, it is crucial to acknowledge both their strengths and limitations

(Kakilla, 2021). Table 3.3 identifies the strengths and weaknesses of semi-structured interviews.

Table 3.3: Strengths and weaknesses of semi-structured interviews

Strengths	Weaknesses
Flexibility	Time-consuming
Rich, detailed data	Interviewer bias
Clarification and follow-up	Inconsistency
Builds rapport	Data complexity
Adaptability to different participants	Participant misunderstanding

Source: Own source and customised from Bryman (2021)

To overcome the weaknesses of semi-structured interviews during data collection, several proactive steps were taken. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams meetings, which helped address the time-consuming nature of the process by enabling flexible scheduling and reducing travel time, making the sessions more convenient for participants. Additionally, conducting interviews remotely via Teams provided a more comfortable, less formal setting, helping build rapport with participants and encouraging open, honest responses. To minimise interviewer bias, a semi-structured interview with a clear guide was adhered to, consistent questions were used while maintaining mindfulness of tone and language. The platform also facilitated real-time clarification and follow-up, reducing the risk of misunderstandings by allowing me to ask for more details or clarify questions as needed.

To address inconsistent responses, a standardised set of core questions was maintained, with flexibility for relevant follow-ups, ensuring the core themes were covered while allowing participants to share their unique perspectives. Lastly, data complexity was managed by recording sessions on Microsoft Teams, which enabled accurate transcription and easier data organisation. This ensured that data was systematically coded and that the rich qualitative data collected could be analysed. These strategies helped mitigate the inherent weaknesses of semi-structured interviews and ensured a more efficient and reliable data collection process.

3.5.2 Data collection instrument

The interview guide used in this study consisted of semi-structured questions designed to facilitate a relaxed, open conversation with participants. As a semi-structured guide, it provided a framework of core questions to ensure consistency across interviews, while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions and spontaneous discussions based on participants' responses. This approach enabled the researcher to explore key themes related to the challenges women face in senior management roles, their professional development, and the organisational dynamics within JRA. The semi-structured format encouraged participants to share their experiences in detail, while still maintaining a focus on the research objectives. The guide was carefully crafted to ensure that the interviews remained both comprehensive and adaptable to each participant's unique perspective. A copy of the interview guide is attached as Appendix A.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis refers to the process of systematically examining, organising, and interpreting data to identify patterns, relationships, and insights that help answer research questions or test hypotheses (Creswell, 2014). In qualitative research, this process often involves coding and categorising textual or visual data, which is then organised into themes or patterns. Specialised software tools, such as Atlas.ti 23, can facilitate this analysis by enabling researchers to efficiently code, organise, and visualise large datasets, helping them identify key themes and draw meaningful conclusions. Software such as Atlas.ti 23 provides a structured way to manage complex qualitative data and supports the generation of thematic maps and other visualisations that enhance understanding of the research findings.

3.6.1 Atlas.ti 23

In this study, the researcher utilised Atlas.ti 23, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to effectively manage and analyse extensive qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews. This software facilitated coding, categorisation, and interpretation of the raw qualitative data, allowing the researcher to systematically explore the data and identify patterns, themes, and relationships

(Olapane, 2021). By leveraging Atlas.ti 23, the researcher generated visualisations that aided both comprehension and presentation of the findings.

According to Friese (2019), Atlas.ti 23 is widely recognised in social science research for its versatility, particularly in fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and education. The software's flexibility makes it suitable for a wide range of qualitative research methods, including grounded theory, content analysis, and discourse analysis. In this study, the researcher employed the software to create four main themes, each containing various sub-themes, which helped structure and analyse the data more effectively.

The process involved several key steps. First, the researcher engaged in data coding, labelling segments of interview text to capture relevant information. After coding, categorisation occurred, grouping the codes into broader themes that reflected the major patterns emerging from the data. This categorisation process was crucial for organising complex and diverse information into manageable, coherent units for further analysis.

Next, the researcher defined and named each of the four main themes in a way that was both meaningful and easily understandable, ensuring that the themes accurately represented the participants' experiences and the research focus. The software's capabilities also enabled collaboration, allowing the researcher to share data and coding frameworks, which added depth and rigour to the analysis.

3.6.2 Atlas.ti 23 coding of theme development

The study employed a hybrid thematic analysis approach that incorporated both inductive and deductive coding procedures. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives, while deductive coding was guided by selected concepts derived from HCT and empowerment theory. Deductive coding focused particularly on constructs related to skills development, training, career advancement, agency, and access to opportunities. This combined approach enabled the study to remain grounded in participants' experiences while aligning the analysis with its theoretical framework.

Within the deductive phase of analysis, concepts associated with HCT informed codes relating to training, skills acquisition, competency development, and career progression. Empowerment-related concepts informed codes associated with agency, participation, access to opportunities, confidence, and organisational support for women’s advancement.

Table 3.4 illustrates the hybrid thematic analysis process followed in this study, showing how participant narratives were systematically coded and organised into subthemes and themes. The analysis combined inductive coding derived from the data with deductive coding informed by HCT and empowerment concepts, which were used as a contextual lens.

Table 3.4: Illustration of coding and theme development process

Participant Extract	Initial Code	Sub-theme	Theme	Link Construct
“The leadership training programmes helped me improve my managerial skills and qualify for promotion”	Skills improvement through training	Professional development	Career progression of women	HCT
“Mentorship programmes gave me the confidence to apply for senior management positions”	Increased confidence through mentorship	Agency and self-confidence	Women’s leadership development	Empowerment

Participant Extract	Initial Code	Sub-theme	Theme	Link Construct
“The organisation supported women by providing access to workshops and development initiatives”	Organisational support for women	Access to development opportunities	Institutional support mechanisms	HCT with contextual empowerment support

Source: Researchers’ own source (2026)

Table 3.4 demonstrates the systematic approach followed in analysing the qualitative data. The hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis ensured that themes were grounded in participants’ narratives while also being interpreted through a theoretical lens. HCT served as the primary analytical framework, particularly regarding skills development, training, and career progression, while empowerment concepts provided complementary insights into agency, voice, recognition, and organisational support for women’s advancement. The use of Atlas.ti 23 facilitated structured coding, organisation, and data retrieval, thereby enhancing transparency, consistency, and rigour in the analysis process.

3.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

To maintain the credibility and transparency of the research, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations encountered in the study. One of the primary challenges was the small sample size, influenced by budget constraints and unforeseen participant dropouts. The limited number of participants may have reduced the diversity of perspectives captured, thereby affecting the validity and transferability of the findings to the broader JRA employee population. In addition, self-selection bias may have affected the data, as individuals who chose to participate may differ systematically from those who did not. Participants may have been more motivated, more driven, or more likely to have experienced challenges in career progression,

which could have shaped their responses and influenced the study's conclusions. Strategies were employed to mitigate this bias, including assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation, as well as careful recruitment through internal channels to encourage a range of participants. Nonetheless, self-selection remains a limitation, and caution should be exercised when generalising the findings to the wider population.

To mitigate the risk of researcher bias and ensure the richness and depth of data, the researcher employed semi-structured interviews that allowed for in-depth probing and follow-up questions tailored to each participant's responses. This method ensured that the gathered data was thorough and achieved saturation, with no new themes or insights emerging from additional interviews (Halevi Hochwald et al., 2023).

Participants were requested to provide examples and elaborate on their experiences related to each thematic area under investigation to further address potential limitations. This approach sought to elicit detailed, nuanced responses rather than lead participants towards predetermined answers. Facilitating a deeper understanding of their viewpoints and experiences was the ultimate objective, ensuring the data collected was comprehensive and authentic (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The study's time and budget constraints were significant challenges. Time was a significant constraint, as the researcher is a full-time employee, and the participants have busy schedules. Nevertheless, the researcher overcame this challenge by securing the employer's leave for data collection and by allowing participants to indicate their preferred meeting times. The researcher conducted all the interviews virtually, which saved on travel costs.

3.8 POSITIONALITY AND FEASIBILITY

The researcher, a middle-aged woman employed by a state-owned entity in Gauteng (but not JRA), conducted this self-funded research, driven by a commitment to understanding and addressing poor female employee development and retention rates at JRA and across South Africa. To ensure ethical and inclusive research

practices, the study included all potential participants who met predetermined criteria and were identified through a gatekeeper within JRA. These individuals were then approached in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act and ethical research guidelines. Every potential participant was provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the study's objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and risks (Newman et al., 2021). This enabled participants to make an informed choice about their participation (George et al., 2023).

The decision to participate in the study was entirely voluntary and left to the discretion of each individual, ensuring that the study was conducted with impartiality and fairness. Voluntary participation is crucial for minimising potential biases and ensuring that the study's findings reflect the organisation's diverse perspectives (Xu et al., 2020). While the researcher was invested in the study's subject matter, ethical guidelines and methodological rigour were applied to minimise potential biases and maintain the study's objectivity.

The study aimed to establish a strong foundation of credibility and reliability by adhering to the principles of voluntary participation and striving for impartiality. The study's findings are fully acknowledged as significant to the community, and the researcher hopes these results will contribute to a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the subject being explored (Bhat et al., 2023).

This study marks a crucial step toward addressing a pressing societal issue. By delving into the processes involved in developing and retaining senior women at JRA, the study sought to introduce innovative ideas to enhance these processes. Considering the urgency of the matter, the findings of this study could significantly influence the design and implementation of future effective programmes aimed at empowering, retaining, and fostering the growth of women.

South Africa's constitution enshrines the rights and well-being of its citizens. This includes freedom of speech, which enables research within the law's bounds. The study was conducted with utmost integrity and respect for the people involved, ensuring no harm was caused. To minimise disruption to daily life, the study was conducted part-time, primarily over weekends and after office hours.

3.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

All qualitative research must comply with the following quality standards: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024). Haq, et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of credibility in a study because it establishes the truthfulness of the study and suggests using reputable and unbiased data collection methods to ensure credibility in any study. To ensure credibility, the researcher used semi-structured interviews as an appropriate model and a thematic analysis to ensure transparency and clarity in the research.

Ahmed (2024) identifies transferability in research to the extent to which findings and conclusions from one study can be applied to other studies. To maintain transferability, Moser and Korstjens (2018) recommend describing participants' profiles and the data-collection location to provide a clear idea of the study's type and involvement. To enhance the transferability of this study, the research context and the participants (JRA employees) will be clearly described so that other researchers can judge whether the findings may apply to similar settings.

To protect participants' identities and adhere to research ethics, their biographical information was not disclosed in a manner that could identify them. Instead, participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2) during the data collection and analysis process (Khoa et al., 2023). Such anonymisation ensures that future researchers can access and utilise the data without compromising participant confidentiality (Ahmed, 2024). To further strengthen the study's confirmability, the researcher used a thorough data analysis process. This process included systematically coding the data, identifying key themes, and comparing these themes with the larger dataset. This approach is in line with Clark et al. (2021) definition of confirmability, which stresses the importance of transparency and the ability for others to validate the research findings. By carefully documenting the data analysis steps and ensuring the consistency of themes, the researcher aimed to improve the study's credibility and reliability (Halevi Hochwald et al. 2023).

The information provided discusses the importance of establishing credibility in research by implementing the dependability principle. This principle emphasises the need for a clear, detailed description of the research methods in the methodology section. The researcher also reviewed various data sources to ensure that the research was not duplicative of previous literature conducted by other scholars. The resulting research can be considered sound and trustworthy following these rigorous procedures and steps. This approach is crucial to ensure that the research findings are valid and reliable and can be used to inform future studies and decisions.

The researcher ensured trustworthiness in this study by combining data collection methods. Data from interviews were corroborated with findings from the literature review, and member checking was conducted with participants to confirm the accuracy and credibility of the interpreted data. An audit trail of the interview procedures and coding decisions was maintained to enhance the credibility of the findings (Babbie, 2020). These steps enhanced the validity and reliability of the research findings.

3.10 ETHICS

At UNISA, students must obtain ethical clearance as the initial step in their data collection process, in accordance with the university's research policy. Upon satisfying the ethics committee that the research study aligns with the University's high standards and integrity, students will receive approval to commence data collection. This timeframe complies with the ethical requirements, as Ethical Clearance was granted on 11 June 2022 (Appendix E). The interviews were conducted from 5 September 2022 to 13 April 2023. Data collection commenced after ethical clearance was granted. The research study adhered to ethical standards of integrity, validity, reliability and impartiality throughout the research process, from inception to report writing.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as presented in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5: Interview schedule and duration of interviews

No.	Pseudonym	Interview date	Duration (Hours, minutes & seconds)
1	P1	05 September 2022	59 minutes 20 seconds
2	PO4	28 September 2022	22 minutes 58 seconds
3	PO5	29 January 2023	38 minutes 24 seconds
4	PO1	30 January 2023	35 minutes 51 seconds
5	P2	16 March 2023	58 minutes 55 seconds
6	P5	17 March 2023	56 minutes 54 seconds
7	P6	27 March 2023	29 minutes 29 seconds
8	P3	30 March 2023	28 minutes 4 seconds
9	P7	04 April 2023	39 minutes 8 seconds
10	PO2	12 April 2023	26 minutes 27 seconds
11	P4	13 April 2023	56 minutes 26 seconds
12	PO3	13 April 2023	31 minutes 23 seconds
Total time			8 hours 23 minutes 13 seconds
Average length of each interview			41 minutes 56 seconds

Note: P = Head of department; PO = Senior Manager.

The researcher reported the study findings with precision, veracity, and impartiality while upholding ethical standards. Effective record-keeping and data management practices were employed throughout the study to ensure these standards were met. The safety and well-being of the participants were a top priority, and every effort was made to protect their anonymity. All informants' names were replaced with narrative descriptions in the presentation of findings. During transcription and coding, original names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect participants' confidentiality. Each interviewee was given a pseudonym to protect their privacy. Heads of department are represented by the code "P", and senior managers are represented by the code "PO". Furthermore, the data were stored on a password-protected laptop that the researcher could access, ensuring their security (Zhang et al. 2021).

According to Clark et al. (2021), a study's integrity can be compromised if participants are not provided with proper informed consent. Before the study began, the researcher described the study's objective and the participants' roles (Sapkota et al.,

2024). The email invitation provided an information sheet to ensure participants fully understood the study's objectives. Participants were allowed to decline participation at any time and were not coerced into participating. To establish a clear understanding between the researcher and the participants, consent forms were signed to confirm that they were aware of what they agreed to and were willing to participate.

Ethical considerations were meticulously observed, particularly regarding participants' privacy and confidentiality. The participants' identities, views, values, and input were safeguarded with utmost confidentiality. As a responsible researcher, it was ensured that the information provided was not divulged to third parties. To guide the supervisor, transcribed documents with participants' pseudonyms were submitted to ensure their voices were not recognisable, further strengthening their protection.

3.11 ALIGNMENT OF RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, DATA SOURCES, ANALYSIS, AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

To ensure a clear connection between the study's aims and the research process, Table 3.6 aligns the research objectives with the corresponding data sources, analytical methods, and expected outcomes. This mapping demonstrates how each objective is addressed systematically, showing the methodological approach used to gather and interpret data. It also provides a concise overview of how the study's design supports achieving the intended outcomes, ensuring transparency and coherence throughout the research process.

Table 3.6: Alignment of research objectives, data sources, and expected outcomes

Research Objective	Data Source	Data Analysis	Expected Outcome
1. Examine factors obstructing development and retention of executives at JRA	Semi-structured interviews with senior management and literature review	Thematic analysis using Atlas.ti 23 (coding and categorisation of theme development)	Identification of key factors enabling or hindering women's development and retention in senior management roles

Research Objective	Data Source	Data Analysis	Expected Outcome
2. Identify women's challenges when appointed to senior management positions at JRA.	Semi-structured Interviews accounts from senior management and policy document review	Comparative coding and analysis	Themes outlining gender-specific challenges experienced within senior roles
3. Investigate how women's social roles affect the advancement and retention of women in senior management roles at JRA	Semi-structured interviews with males and females' officials at senior levels and literature review. Capturing personal, professional, and social experiences	Pattern identification and linking themes to HCT	Comprehensive list of personal, organisational, and systemic barriers affecting female progression. Insights showing how social expectations, caregiving roles, and societal norms influence career progression
4. Provide human resource (HR) recommendations for integrating women into senior Management positions at JRA.	Information from interview data and literature review	Synthesis of findings	Practical and context-specific recommendations for enhancing female leadership development and retention

Source: Researcher's own (2026)

Table 3.6 illustrates the flow from each research objective to the data sources and analytical steps, ensuring that the study's outcomes are grounded in systematically collected and rigorously analysed interview evidence.

3.12 CONCLUSION

Chapter 3 provided a comprehensive overview of the research methodology used by the researcher in the study, a critical aspect in establishing a research project's credibility and validity (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2023). The chapter meticulously explained each step, focusing on ethical considerations and confidentiality. This emphasis on ethical considerations aligns with the primary principles of research,

such as, justice, beneficence, non-maleficence, and respect for autonomy (Kisselburgh & Beever, 2022).

The chapter opened by emphasising the importance of establishing a research methodology in a project, underscoring its role in ensuring the reliability and validity of the study's outcomes. It then outlined the essential steps of the research process, including data collection, data analysis, and the presentation of results (Tracy, 2024). The data collection section describes the methods used and the steps the researcher took to ensure the validity and reliability of the collected data (Taherdoost, 2021). According to Karunarathna et al. (2024), validity refers to the accuracy of the data, while reliability pertains to its consistency. The chapter outlined the steps taken to ensure the data's validity and reliability, such as using standardised data collection tools, ensuring the data accurately represents the study's population, and minimising errors during data collection (Almusaed et al., 2025).

The section on data analysis explained the statistical methods used to analyse the data and how the researcher ensured that the analysis was accurate and reliable. The chapter discussed measures taken to ensure the analysis was unbiased, including blind analysis, which involved analysing data without knowing participants' identities, and inter-rater reliability checks, which compared the results of different analysts to ensure consistency.

The section on presenting results discussed how the researcher presented the data and the measures taken to ensure the presentation was accurate, transparent, and understandable. The chapter emphasised the importance of transparency in research and the need to make the results accessible to a wide range of audiences.

Finally, the chapter discussed the ethical considerations and confidentiality measures taken in the research process (Aldboush & Ferdous, 2023). It highlighted the importance of maintaining participants' confidentiality and the ethical considerations involved in obtaining informed consent. Procedures used to ensure that the study did not harm the participants, and their privacy was protected were explained (Aldboush & Ferdous, 2023). In conclusion, Chapter 3 provided an extensive overview of the

research project's methodology, emphasising the importance of ethics, transparency, and validity (Saharan et al., 2024).

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

As defined by Creswell (2014) and Babbie (2020), data analysis is a methodical process involving cleaning, transforming, and interpreting data to discern significant patterns, address research inquiries, and substantiate evidence-based conclusions. Qualitative methods, such as coding and thematic analysis, are employed to comprehensively understand the data. This process is both iterative and reflexive, necessitating researchers to continuously refine their approach as they gain fresh perspectives through the information they have collected (Lim & Kumar, 2024). The primary objective of data analysis is to extract meaningful information that can be utilised to guide decision-making, formulate theories, or answer research questions.

According to Hoobler et al. (2018), this section presents the outcomes of an analysis of data that examined the progress and retention of women in senior management positions at JRA. A case study approach was employed to achieve the main research aim of exploring how the JRA can empower women to excel in leadership roles. Semi-structured interviews addressed the research questions, including the primary question: What are the experiences of women in leadership roles at JRA, and how can the organisation assist women in progressing in their careers (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024)? These interviews fostered a semi-structured, comfortable environment, enabling in-depth discussions and valuable insights. The researcher interviewed participants from senior and operational management levels using an identical interview guide, ensuring a comprehensive understanding and reaching a saturation point in the study.

4.2 PROFILE AND THE PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

This section lists the participants' characteristics and provides a brief overview of each. An hour before the interviews, the participants completed a standardised form that collected their demographic information. This form was designed to collect information about gender, an individual's level of qualification, and years of

experience in a position. Figures 1 to 3 present demographic information by gender, level of qualification, and years of experience. Following that, the themes that emerged from the interviews are examined.

4.2.1 Participant gender distribution

Figure 4.1 summarises the demographic profile of participants according to gender. The study comprised 12 participants, of which 67% were female and 33% were male. Although the study primarily focused on women in senior management positions at JRA, male managers and HR personnel were purposively included to provide complementary organisational perspectives on the development, integration, and retention of women in leadership roles.

This gender composition was intentional to ensure a broader understanding of organisational dynamics affecting women's advancement into senior management positions. It is also acknowledged that this sample does not necessarily reflect the organisation's overall gender distribution; therefore, the findings are interpreted within the context of this qualitative case study.

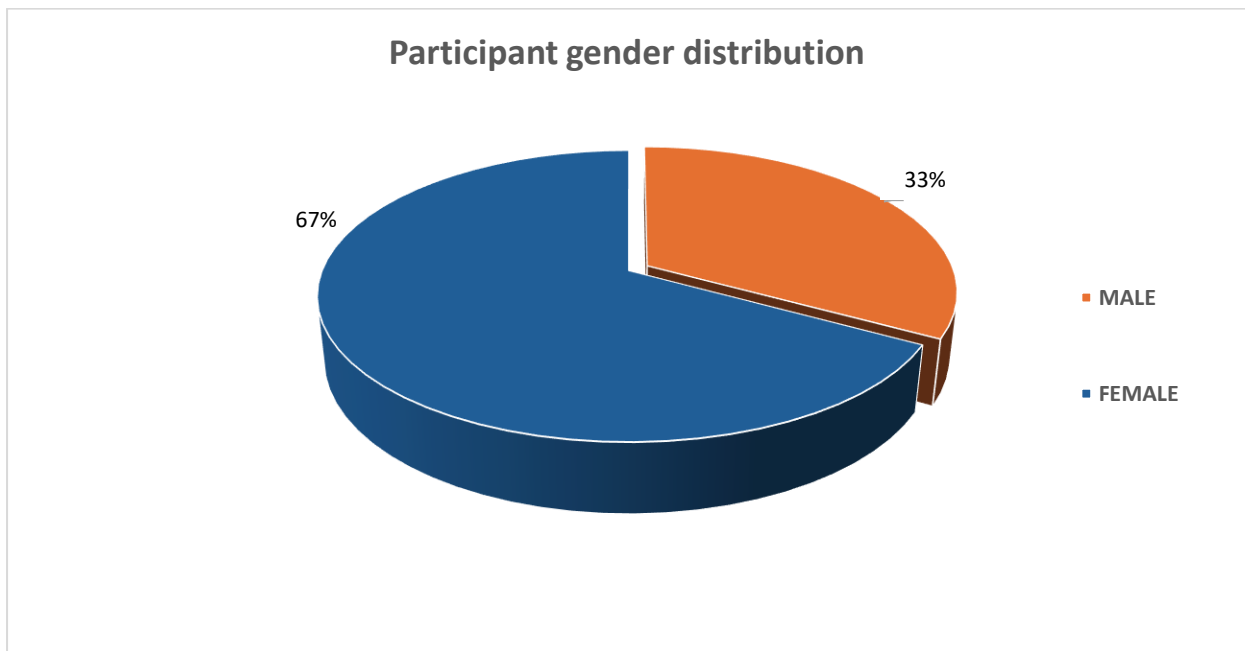


Figure 4.1: Gender distribution
Source: JRA (2023b)

4.2.2 Participant level of qualifications

The qualifications of the participants are depicted in Figure 4.2, which showcases a diverse range of educational achievements, from postgraduate diplomas to PhDs. Specifically, the breakdown of participant qualifications includes three individuals with postgraduate diplomas (NQF Level 8), eight with master's degrees (NQF Level 9), and one with a PhD. NQF (Level 10). These credentials reflect the participants' ability to offer informed perspectives on the topics under investigation, as well as their prior exposure to issues of inequality within senior management.

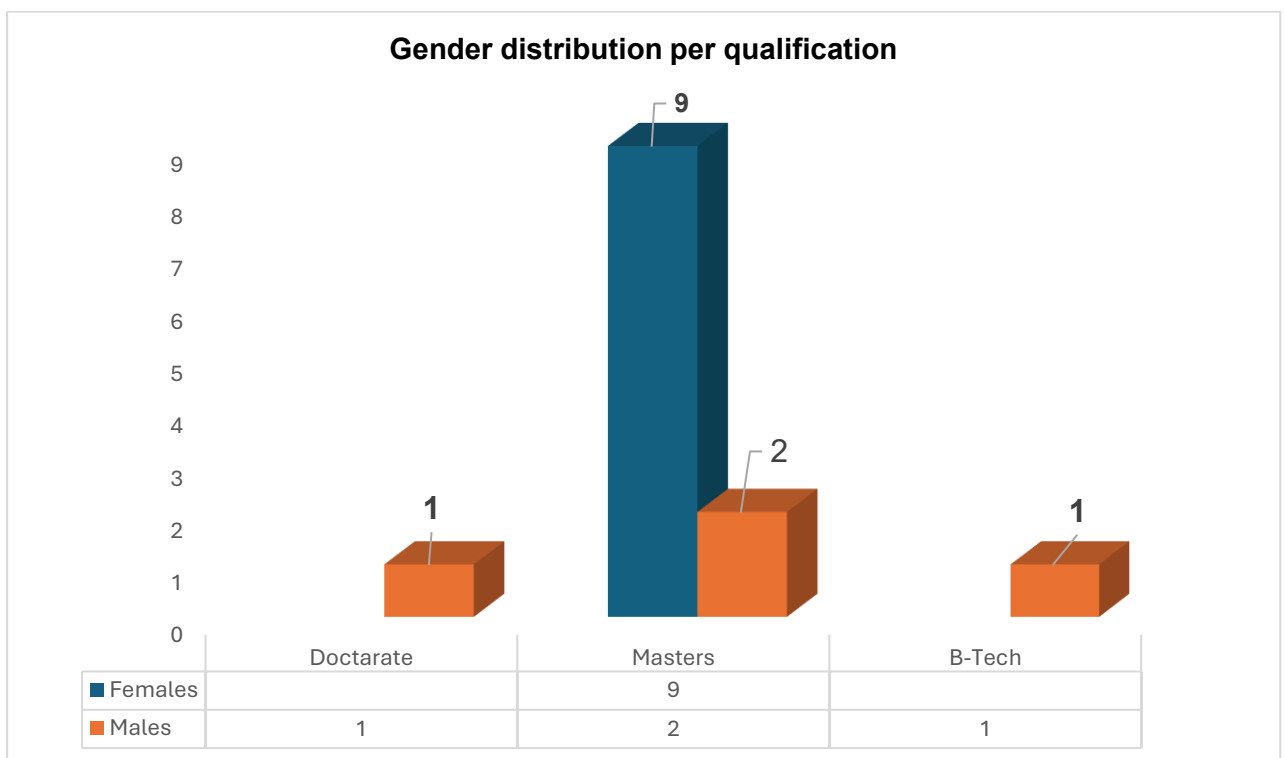


Figure 4.2: Gender distribution by qualification level

Source: JRA (2023b).

4.2.3 Years of experience

The sample consisted of 12 participants with varying years of experience. Most participants (5) had less than a decade of experience. Among these, one participant had only two years of experience serving in a senior management role. In contrast, four others had experience ranging from four to eight years in the same capacity. Meanwhile, four participants had experience ranging from 10 to 15 years, while the remaining two had an impressive 20 years of experience in their respective positions.

This distribution of experience levels among the participants could affect the study's findings. For instance, the participants with less than a decade of experience may have less nuanced perspectives on the topic under investigation than their more experienced counterparts. Conversely, participants with over a decade of experience could bring a wealth of knowledge and insights, enriching the study's results (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024).

Therefore, it is essential to consider participants' experience levels when interpreting the study results and making recommendations based on the findings (Ahmed, 2024). Figure 4.3 shows that participants had varied years of experience working at the executive levels, ranging from two to twenty years.

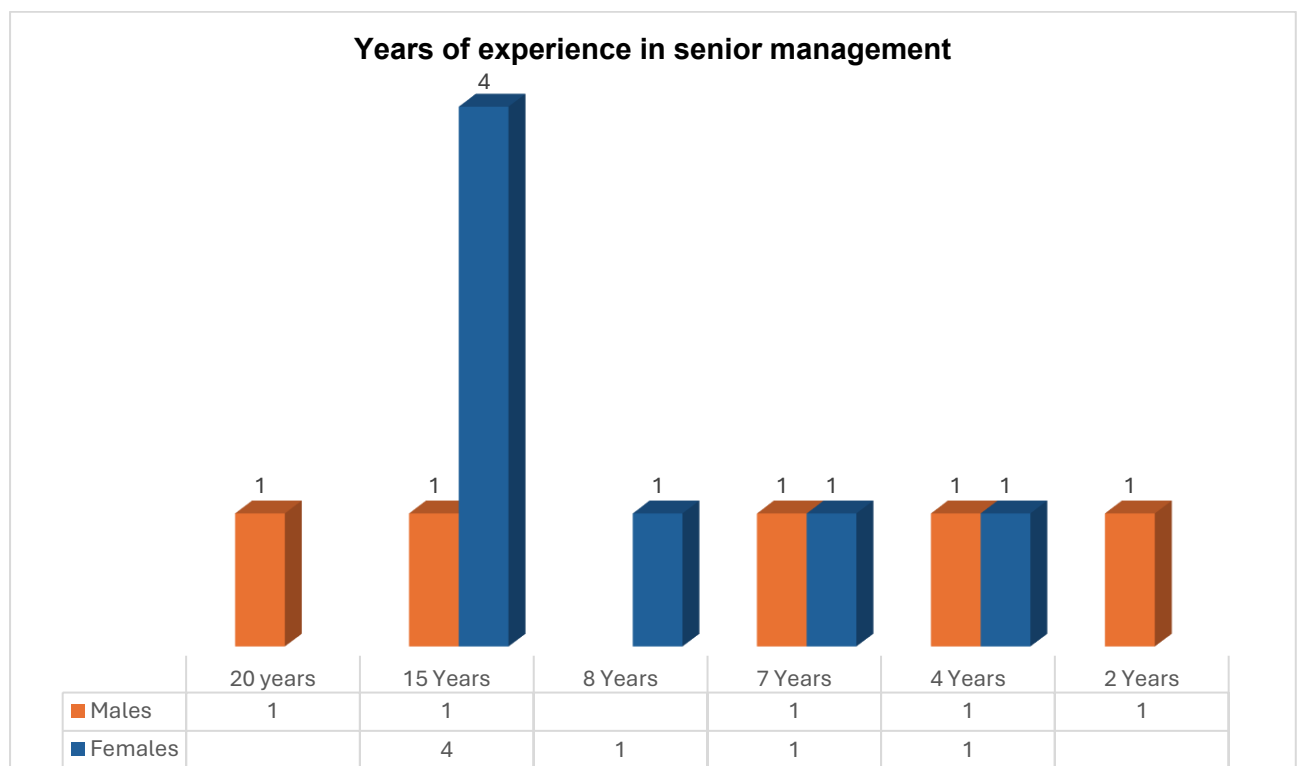


Figure 4.3: Senior management experience in years
Source: JRA (2023b).

4.3 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

4.3.1 Analysis of the demographics of the participants

The study probes gender diversity and inclusion in leadership positions, focusing on the experiences of individuals within JRA (Du, 2024). The research reveals a significant finding: 67% of participants in senior management positions at the JRA are female, while 33% are male. According to Woods et al. (2024), this gender distribution suggests a relatively balanced representation of women in leadership roles within the agency. Furthermore, the data indicate that these participants have diverse educational backgrounds: 67% hold master's degrees, 8% hold PhDs, and 16% hold postgraduate diplomas. Van Knippenberg and van Ginkel (2022) concur that diversity in educational attainment suggests a broad range of experiences and perspectives that can enrich discussions and insights into promoting gender diversity and inclusion in leadership.

The findings suggest that diverse participants with varying experience levels can contribute valuable knowledge to enhance gender diversity and inclusion in leadership positions (Tushabe et al., 2025). This study's outcomes may benefit organisations seeking to cultivate a more diverse and inclusive environment.

4.4 THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

Thematic analysis of the dataset, facilitated by Atlas.ti software for coding and subsequent analysis, yielded four overarching themes, each elucidated by corresponding sub-themes. Following Braun and Clark's (2022) conceptualisation, a theme encapsulates the multifaceted patterns within the data, while sub-themes delve deeper into specific aspects of these patterns. Network visualisation, as depicted in Figure 4.4, illustrates the interconnected relationships between the four primary themes and their respective sub-themes, providing a comprehensive overview of the thematic structure emerging from the Atlas.ti 23 supported analysis.

The thematic analysis was guided by a hybrid coding approach that combined inductive coding from participant narratives with deductive sensitising concepts derived from Human Capital Theory and Kabeer's Empowerment Framework. During

the coding process, data segments relating to organisational investments in employees' knowledge, skills, training, mentoring, and career development were coded under the broad category of human capital investments. Codes relating to access to organisational resources, networks, information, support structures, and developmental opportunities were grouped under the resource access category. Participant accounts describing decision-making authority, career self-management, leadership influence, and the ability to act on opportunities informed the agency category. Finally, evidence of career advancement, promotion, leadership attainment, professional growth, and perceived career success informed the achievements/outcomes category. These theoretically informed categories served as analytical lenses through which initial codes were organised, compared, and refined into the final themes and sub-themes. Consequently, the themes reported in this chapter emerged not only from the participants' experiences but also from the interaction between the empirical data and the theoretical dimensions underpinning the study.

This visual representation serves as a framework for understanding the nuanced interconnections among the themes and sub-themes, facilitating a more in-depth exploration of the data's underlying meanings and implications. By mapping the thematic structure in this way, researchers can gain a holistic perspective on the complex interplay of factors contributing to the observed patterns, ultimately enhancing the interpretive power and explanatory potential of the Atlas.ti 23 supported analysis.



Figure 4.4: Main themes and sub-themes

Source: Atlas.ti 23

4.4.1 Theme 1: Career development

The data analysis centred on career development, particularly women's multifaceted growth and organisational leadership. Significantly, the findings highlighted the challenges women face in advancing their careers in the JRA, including the lack of tailored programmes and the impact of leadership instability and workplace social conditioning (Meagher et al., 2023). The study emphasised the importance of mentorship programmes in empowering and guiding women leaders, enabling them to learn from experienced colleagues and shape their leadership journeys within the organisation.

Overall, the data analysis highlighted women's unique career hurdles and the importance of creating an inclusive, supportive environment that fosters their professional development. The findings also explored the hindrances and facilitators affecting women's progress toward senior management roles. They identified the need for tailored career development programmes to empower women to overcome these obstacles. In addition, the study's themes – instability in leadership, workplace

social conditions, lack of programmes for women, and women's mentorship programmes – offer practical insights for the JRA to promote women's career development and leadership growth.

These findings also indicate that access to skills development opportunities is not uniform across all employees, suggesting underlying differences in how organisational training is distributed and accessed across groups.

4.4.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Lack of programmes tailor-made for women

This finding concerns the absence of development initiatives specifically designed for female leaders within the organisation. During the survey, participants were asked whether JRA offers development programmes tailored to women. Half of the participants stated that no such programmes are available. Furthermore, participants mentioned the challenge of insufficient funding to support programmes to train and empower women. In conclusion, the participants emphasised the need for more support for female leaders within the organisation.

P1

In terms of developing women in the JRA, to be honest with you, I do not see that; I do not know of any programmes that are tailor-made for women, for example, mentorship where women will be mentored; I never heard anything of like that, I have never heard of programmes that are meant to develop women in the organisation, I have never heard of that. So, from where I am sitting, I do not see JRA actively playing a role in developing women in this organisation ... for you to implement that, you need to be intentional; JRA needs to be very intentional about it. Intentional in the sense that you cannot just say, okay, I need women in these positions, and then you are not doing anything to ensure that women are in those positions...

P2

However, where that is being implemented to the latter must be interrogated. So yes, it is not necessarily targeted at women. It is there to benefit all employees, but I think, like the educational assistance policy, you have to

benefit from it. I have not heard of women applying it not being supported because they are women.

PO2

Look, I would say they are not doing much because firstly, I know activities that specifically develop women So, I do not even know if I can speak today whether the desk is still active. Yeah! However, we never heard anything about women. We only heard that we are starting with the women's desk.

PO5

I have never seen anything of that nature. So basically, there is nothing in place ... they should also request inputs from those who are currently in and have an interest in seeing themselves at senior levels so that they can try to address the gaps and be able to develop certain weaknesses that they have identified with their existing females who are envisaging to see themselves in senior positions.

PO 6

I do not think there is anything, I do not think there is anything that is gender specific that the entities are doing to develop women. I think all development is done equally, so I do not think it's gender-specific to say we are trying to improve or upskill our female employees, but rather ... I think that I indicated. I do not think there's specific support for female management within the organisation; it's on a case-by-case basis if you need that assistance on a personal level or on in your capacity for that

PO7

I haven't seen any, I haven't seen any anything that indicates that management is doing to develop the women, although we've got employment equity, I don't think it has been implemented. We haven't even, I personally don't even know But to be honest, I don't even know when that policy was approved. I've never seen it. I don't know what its purpose is. I don't even know who's driving the process.

The responses reveal a lack of awareness and implementation of programmes specifically designed for women's development within the organisation. Participants across different levels consistently express unfamiliarity with such initiatives. While some mention general development programmes available to all employees, the absence of targeted efforts for women is evident. The mention of a woman's desk by PO2 and a lack of follow-up by females and JRA executives further underscores the perception of inaction. Moreover, the statement by PO2 regarding the lack of information on women being denied opportunities due to their gender raises questions about the extent to which gender is considered in decision-making processes.

The findings indicate a lack of targeted development initiatives for women at JRA, with participants reporting minimal awareness of or implementation of gender-specific programmes, reflecting challenges with organisational support for female leadership (JRA, 2023b). This is consistent with Saha et al. (2024), who note that women's career advancement is constrained by insufficient structured development and retention strategies within public sector institutions. Through HCT interpretations, the outcomes suggest that the JRA does not fully engage with women's accumulated skills and experiences, thereby decreasing the organisation's return on human capital. This disconnect highlights the need to implement formal developmental frameworks to maximise talent growth.

Viewed through Kabeer's Empowerment Framework, this theme highlights the importance of access to resources in shaping women's career advancement. Organisational investments such as training, mentoring, leadership development, and networking opportunities provided critical resources that enhanced participants' professional capabilities. These resources strengthened women's agency by increasing their confidence, competence, and ability to pursue career opportunities and leadership roles. Where such support was available, participants reported positive outcomes, including career progression, increased visibility, and advancement into senior management positions. Conversely, limited access to developmental opportunities constrained agency and career outcomes.

4.4.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Women's mentorship programmes

This finding highlights the importance of a mentorship programme that cultivates women's leadership skills within the organisation. The participants expressed a desire to be mentored by other successful women leaders in the organisation, as they believe this would allow them to gain valuable insights and follow in their footsteps. Additionally, this presents a valuable opportunity for young women leaders to observe and learn from practical examples of women's leadership within the organisation, thereby supporting their personal and professional growth.

Most participants spanning both categories expressed the importance of women-focused development programmes at JRA that prioritise female leadership and growth. They proposed implementing job shadowing and mentorship programmes to help women acquire experience and prepare for more advanced roles. Additionally, the participants recommend strengthening gender governance and policies and increasing leadership accountability and capacity for gender equality. They shared their experience of being thrust into a role without proper handovers and emphasised the significance of recognition and support from higher-ups. The group expressed a need for succession plans and encouragement for women to move into leadership positions. They believe fostering an environment where women can lead without feeling intimidated is crucial to the organisation's success. Another significant finding from this sub-theme is the need for JRA to have a succession plan. To advance the findings, the participants who responded to the subject had this to say:

P1

I think women ... need to be developed. I will go back to my earlier comment around mentorship, and if possible, in other companies, they do what we call job shadowing, e.g., I will shadow the CEO as learning, being mentored, but obviously work with him...

So, I think jaa ... if we can do more job shadowing for women, so if I am on level 3 job for example, and then I do not just by acting, I think acting is not enough but actively job shadowing a person who is higher up, a person that

you are reporting to so that when they leave or not only when they leave when an opportunity of that similar kind presents itself then you're able to take it.

Succession plan, to be honest with you, succession plan for me to be like job shadowing, job shadowing plays a vital role. I need to be under the shadow of someone senior to me so that when a role comes that is senior You don't have to be really cold for you to lead people you can lead with empathy, and I think women can lead with that empathy, and I think more women are leading with empathy, women are more understanding err

P3

My experience is, we can do it as we may, we can set standards. We can turn this organisation around it. Umm, I've had an experience where I was thrown in there without the handover

P4

... support, you know. The employees, through either skills development or training activities. Umm, exposing people to different environments so that they can gain experiences, and they can be able to grow from that point on. Umm, management support ... I am over 18 months into the environment, but I'm still learning some of the environments. And the questions they asked revealed to me that we are not taking care of as people.

P5

... requirement that. You need to deal with the issues around employment equity, so the institution needs to have that right, the representation. One for all genders and all races. So, the JRA obviously subscribes to that requirement that needs to and make sure that, uh, on all levels.

Uh, we have the right representation, especially women, so the drives. I'm sure you would have seen lately that most of the appointments. Let's see if, the management was going to appoint the ladies and specifically at the CEO's office and one of the HODs and communication ...

PO1

So, I think if women are also, held properly, hold their hand, show them that this it may not be easy, but they can do it. Because there's nothing that changes. Those who confront such core business departments from being human beings, they still remain human beings ... now that I do not think that there are succession plans as such, and because has there been some sort of succession plans in the committee, there wouldn't be any need for a committee to be instituted. For policy to be amended in order to support, you know, women, and I'm saying this regardless of whether women are considered as males, it's I have. I just haven't seen it...

PO2

So, by grooming, I'm saying that's how I would prefer that maybe if women were given a chance to say, maybe like to have someone walking them through. And that's at the executive level, you know, to have exposure of what's going on there to have a plan to be given a platform to sometimes make a representation to their bosses at a certain level.

Umm, mentorship prefer can put it like that, that mentor-mentee relationship within the organisation whereby they were to identify potential or maybe a group of women who can be groomed by them, they are walked through what's happening at the senior management level.

PO4

So, the space will be more of learning of teaching people, of making people aware that in the life, we're living in an environment we are in now, there are chances, and then there are possibilities, and there should be opportunities for women leaders to participate without feeling intimidated. And all this, and as I said earlier it it's not about JRA

So, you will find that the numbers are very few are in that space, and the organisation should then encourage more women to move into that space.

PO5

So, the space will be more of learning of teaching people, of making people aware that in the life we're living in an environment we are in now, there are chances, and then there are possibilities, and they should be opportunities for women leaders to participate without feeling intimidated. And all this, and as I said earlier it it's not about JRA

So, you will find that the numbers are very few in that space, and the organisation should encourage more women to move into that space.

The findings indicate a strong desire among participants for mentorship and job shadowing programmes to develop women's leadership skills at JRA. Participants highlighted the value of learning directly from senior women leaders, having structured succession plans, and receiving guidance to navigate leadership roles effectively. The responses underscore the need for targeted support, exposure, and practical leadership opportunities, reflecting the literature that emphasises mentorship as a critical tool for advancing women in management (JRA, 2023b; Kumar et al., 2023). These findings align with constructivist theory, which supports learning through observation, reflection, and engagement with experienced role models, highlighting the role of experiential learning in women's professional growth.

4.4.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Lack of stability in leadership

This sub-theme pertains to the challenges posed by an unstable leadership environment within an organisation, particularly in senior positions. It encompasses various aspects of leadership stability, including frequent turnover of leaders, adapting to new leadership styles, and the impact of political influences on leadership positions. Some participants have underscored the pivotal role of firm and stable leadership in ensuring business continuity and effectively addressing the distinctive challenges posed by an unstable leadership environment. The lack of stability can have adverse effects on the overall functioning of the organisation and hinder employees' ability to comprehend and acclimate to the expectations and preferences of new leaders. Furthermore, political factors may exacerbate this issue.

According to some participants, the JRA is confronted with significant challenges stemming from the inconsistency in its leadership. They strongly advocate the necessity of adjusting to new leaders and their expectations while acknowledging the detrimental impact of this instability on the organisation. They recommend notifying the relevant authorities of this issue to guarantee stability and seamless business operations. Additionally, they assert that the absence of stability may dissuade qualified professionals from seeking senior positions within the organisation. Ultimately, they argue that the prevailing political environment is characterised by instability. These viewpoints are supported by the following statements made by the participants.

PO7

I think the fact that there's no stability leadership around JRA, so I think as and when a new person comes, you need to learn how do they want their reports? ... So, I think, yeah, the instability, leadership, I think that also cause an impact and I don't think it's, it's only as an individual challenge, but I think it's an, it's a unique challenge and it could also be an organisational challenge It's a political environment in all fairness and there's no stability. And you know when it's a political environment, it, it means certain positions ...

P5

Perhaps the money is not that Uh, enticing to the person another challenge that you sit with its stability especially senior positions like my duty and the like where people want stability, but the challenge is there is no stability here.

Both P2 and P5 highlight the detrimental impact of leadership instability at the JRA. They emphasise that the frequent turnover of leadership necessitates constant adaptation to new reporting styles and preferences, creating a unique challenge for employees. This instability, they argue, is not only an individual burden but also a systemic issue within the organisation, likely stemming from the politically charged environment in which the JRA operates.

These participants indicate that unstable leadership can have a significant negative effect on organisational success, particularly when it comes to diversity and equity.

Frequent leadership changes can create an environment of uncertainty and inconsistency, undermine long-term strategic goals and make it difficult to implement sustainable diversity and inclusion initiatives. In such an environment, policies and initiatives meant to support gender equity, for example, may be frequently altered or abandoned, reducing their effectiveness.

Moreover, unstable leadership often leads to a lack of clear direction and a diminished ability to foster a culture of inclusivity. When leadership is uncertain, it can discourage employees from aspiring to senior positions, particularly those from underrepresented groups, because they may perceive the organisation as lacking stability or commitment to diversity. This not only affects recruitment and retention of diverse talent but can also perpetuate existing disparities in senior roles. As a result, the organisation may struggle to build diverse leadership teams, which are proven to enhance decision-making, innovation, and overall performance.

The findings indicate that unstable leadership at JRA creates challenges for organisational functioning, requiring employees to constantly adjust to new expectations and leadership styles. Participants noted that frequent turnover undermines continuity, discourages career advancement, and affects the implementation of policies promoting equity. This aligns studies showing that leadership instability can negatively impact employee development and retention, particularly for underrepresented groups, and may disrupt organisational learning and succession planning (Parks & Hayman, 2024; Von Klinggraeff et al., 2024). From a constructivist perspective, the findings highlight that employees' experiences and interpretations of organisational practices are influenced by the instability of leadership, shaping their professional growth and perceptions of workplace support.

4.4.1.4 Sub-theme 4: Perceived social conditions in the workplace

Sub-theme 4 references the intricate combination of factors that influence individuals' treatment, opportunities, and expectations based on gender, specifically in professional and leadership positions. This sub-theme encompasses the hurdles that women face in male-dominated environments, the powerful effects of socialisation on beliefs and behaviour surrounding gender roles, and the diverse perceptions and

biases that influence how women are viewed and evaluated in the workplace, acknowledging the impact of a patriarchal societal structure. It emphasises the need to address and alleviate gender inequalities, challenges societal norms and stereotypes, and promotes gender equality and inclusivity in all aspects of life.

This sub-theme tackles important themes about gender dynamics in the male-dominant contexts by highlighting the challenges women encounter, the impact of socialisation on gender roles, and the prejudices that impact women's experiences and assessments in the workplace.

Challenges in male-dominated environments

Women frequently face major barriers in the male-dominated sectors, such as discrimination based on gender, unequal compensation, and few prospects for development. Stereotypes and cultural expectations that might impede women's well-being and career development exacerbate these difficulties. For example, societal norms that impact professional choices and opportunities may result in women being overrepresented in caring professions and underrepresented in leadership roles (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

Impact of socialisation on gender roles

According to Sánchez-Mira et al. (2022), socialisation is crucial in forming attitudes and actions related to gender roles. Social norms about masculinity and femininity are instilled in people from a young age, and this can have an impact on their professional goals and conduct. This socialisation frequently results in occupational segregation, which reinforces already-existing gender inequality by pushing women toward lower-paying, historically female-dominated occupations

Perceptions and biases in the workplace

A study by Cohen-Hatton (2023) reveals that the way women are perceived and assessed in professional contexts is greatly influenced by a variety of prejudices and perceptions. According to studies, women are more likely than men to be interrupted,

challenged, and undervalued, creating a problem that can obstruct their ability to develop in their careers. Furthermore, women may experience subtle biases and microaggressions that damage their self-esteem and professional status.

Addressing gender inequalities

Social norms and assumptions that reinforce gender biases must be challenged to advance gender equality and inclusivity. This entails putting in place laws that guarantee equal compensation for equal labour, giving women access to mentorship programmes, and cultivating corporate cultures that respect inclusivity and diversity. To address these structural problems, educational programmes that aim to alter societal norms and lessen gender relations disparities are also essential. Tackling the difficulties women encounter in the male-dominated settings necessitates a multidimensional strategy that considers the influence of socialisation inherent in workplace assessments and the larger societal institutions that sustain gender inequality (Tucker, 2024).

Notably, most participants contributed significantly to this sub-theme, particularly participant P1, who provided a lengthy and detailed response to its various factors.

P1

Social roles do play a big role because we have socialised differently and been, you know, we have been raised obviously and socialised differently, and if you're from a school of thought that says that a women's space is in the kitchen and then you are a man and you come into a senior role so when you meet someone who is on the same level as you and when you, you going to have the serious problem so chances are you going to be very hostile towards that woman because you still the believe that women are inferior because of how you have been socialised...

I think the organisation also needs to understand that yes, I am a woman leader but I am also a mother, a sister, you know and the pain felt at home sometimes are not level in a sense that I tend to take more responsibilities that a man needs to take care of the households meaning that when the child is

sick, I am more likely to be there for the child than the man would be there for a child, you understand, with the demand of leadership and corporate responsibilities then you find yourself having to compromise and when you find yourself comprising a lot on the work over my family for the sake of a job, that is constantly pushing me to be a skilled executive then at the end of the day...

P2

So, so the policy is there, so yes, there is in terms of your, your educational aspirations, this applies across the board for all employees, and it's really dependent on whether the particular individual wants to apply or to take advantage of that policy or not. So, so the policies. So, for example, there is employee assistance in terms of your educational aspirations. This applies across the board for all employees, and it really depends on whether the particular individual wants to apply or to take advantage of that policy or not...

...The Employment Equity policy is there. It is also dependent on particular positions that have been advertised, knowing that many people in the depots would not want all females working in the dev environment but in management. There is a possibility that it's a male who qualify. The policy allows them to be deployed so, if particular positions that have been advertised, knowing that many people in the depots would not want more females working in the dev environment. Still, in management, there is a possibility that if women do qualify, the policy allows them to be employed...

I think there is a lot of focus on gender equity trying to ensure gender roles don't impact. How women are considered is a minimal impact or relationship between the social roles. And the ability of women in the meeting in senior management positions...

PO3

Because patriarchy is a worldwide phenomenon, that's where we are in terms of the challenges that we confront. We can't rely on the patriarchy to liberate us. So, we are sustaining a system if we do not systematically, Umm, you know, dismantle issues of patriarchy.

PO4

But you tend to find socialisation at the moment if there's more males in that space. They will tend to congregate together, talk together, and then a woman might still feel like an outsider because then she's outside.

PO5

The social responsibilities are impacting or it's an assumption that women do have social responsibilities and maybe they are incapable of occupying those positions. Or maybe there's a fear of the unknown as to when women occupy these positions; it will extinguish the number of males occupying senior positions. That's my opinion.

PO6

So obviously when you deal with males and you are a female, there's sort of biases that are and prejudices that are in people's minds to say you are a female and therefore you, I don't want to but there's a certain level of patriarchy that you deal with when you are a female in a male-dominated industry, and therefore you have to fight that off.

Based on the responses of participants PO4, PO5, and PO6, it can be inferred that the male-dominated environments, women often experience social exclusion, gender bias and patriarchal attitudes that reinforce stereotypes about their capabilities and roles. These dynamics create barriers to inclusion and advancement because men tend to dominate social and professional spaces, leaving women feeling like outsiders.

This perception is supported by the accounts of women continuing to face challenges related to perceived patriarchal attitudes displayed by some male employees within the organisation. While the specific details of these experiences are not provided, the participants' responses suggest that the EE policy's goals of promoting gender equality and eliminating discrimination may not be fully realised in women lived experiences at JRA.

4.4.2 Theme 2: Gender disparity

The analysis reveals a significant theme of gender disparity, highlighting the numerous challenges and imbalances that women face when pursuing senior management positions in male-dominated industries (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). It is crucial to address these disparities to promote fair gender representation and provide equitable opportunities for women in leadership positions. The data also revealed eight sub-sub-themes that further support this theme. These include a lack of policy implementation, balancing work and family, fair gender representation, women's self-agency needs, limited policy for women, a lack of female leadership, fair policy implementation, and male dominance in the industry.

4.4.2.1 Lack of implementation of policy

The data analysis indicates a notable discrepancy between policy objectives and their practical implementation within the organisation, resulting in an impediment to the effective support and promotion of women in senior management positions. This sub-theme is a part of the broader theme of Gender Disparity which addresses the challenges associated with policies failing to translate into tangible actions that advance women's careers within the organisation. In essence, this refers to the organisational challenge where the intended policies or initiatives related to promoting gender equity and supporting the advancement of women in leadership roles are not effectively put into practice. Despite policy statements recognising the need for gender diversity and women's empowerment in the workplace, their implementation remains limited or inconsistent.

The data set reveals instances where the gap between policy formulation and actual execution hinders progress towards achieving gender equality in senior management. Most participants in the study expressed concerns over the lack of policy implementation at JRA, while participant P4 raised an important point about the subjectivity of retention. These responses from the participants have contributed to the sub-theme.

P2

... uh, so the policy environment is there, but it's in practice it's a bit limited as you as there are very few women in top management in the organisation. But I also know that they've also established a women's desk in the organisation to try and engage women on matters that relate to women. So, there is policy intention. But of course, practice may be a challenge.

P3

... those rules that have to be managed. How you make decisions as well, it doesn't come automatically. Here in JRA. So, if we just talk without proper programmes, put there to support and also monitor the implementation of such, it will remain cheap.

P4

Well, I don't think there's anything specific in terms of retention. Mm, because retention is very subjective as well, but I think they are in number of elements that people would look into, specifically women.

PO1

I'm not really aware of any policy that JRA may have; therefore, my comment may be quite pushing above.

PO2

No, there is no policy that I'm aware of. We only have policies that are work related, policies that are generic applying to all employees and the policies that are driven by the regulations and the laws or maybe. We don't have

PO3

I don't I don't think that there is any policy that would kind of force advancement of women into senior management positions, but yes, they are in enabling policies and those enabling policies also determine the organisational culture and readiness, you know, for women to you know, to advance into senior manager management positions.

PO4

There's no specific policy that says when we have introduced women or we have seen women employees joining the organisation, this will be a programme to support them throughout the organisation. I don't think the organisation has anything like that or I'm not aware of it.

PO5

I haven't seen any, I haven't seen any anything that indicates that management is doing to develop the women, although we've got an employment equity, I'm I don't think it has been implemented. We haven't even. I personally, I don't even know.

4.4.2.2 Balancing work and family

The data analysis highlights the unique challenges female leaders face in balancing professional responsibilities with family commitments. It underscores the difficulties and expectations placed on women in achieving equilibrium between their careers and personal lives. In summary, participants discuss the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities as women leaders. They mention the conflicts that arise when choosing between important meetings and attending their children's activities or health appointments. They express the need for organisations to consider and support work-life balance for women in leadership positions. Fewer participants expressed that women face the additional burden of family responsibility that women carry, and the lack of understanding and support from JRA in this regard. They mention the difficulties of balancing their leadership responsibilities with caring for their families. To advance this sub-theme, the participants had this to say:

P1

I think the organisation also need to understand that yes I am a woman leader but I am also a mother, a sister you know and the pain felt at home sometimes are not level in a sense that I tend to take more responsibilities that a man needs to take care of the households meaning that when the child is sick, I am more likely to be there for the child than the man would be there for a child, you understand, with the demand of leadership and corporate responsibilities

then you find yourself having to compromise. At the end of the day I would find myself having to make sound decisions that are in my best interest and my best interest would be maybe I leave this environment and go to look for other environment that is more receptive, and environment that will understand that you are still a mother that will offer me that flexibility that I need in order to have a work-life balance that is why you find other women would choose to leave an organisation if they feel that an organisation is not supportive of their work-life balance ambitions.

PO3

... umm. especially considering that women have the additional burden of running you know, of running households of family responsibilities and so forth. Typical thinking, getting back to the issue of family responsibility.

I think the lack of support, the lack of understanding that women carry the additional burden of family responsibility. I mean you would have calls, emergencies late at night and nobody's considering that this is the time that you need to feed your family, because especially when you are a single woman.

PO6

You know, if now I have to choose between attending an important meeting, or taking my child to his rugby match, tennis match, or the doctor. You know, you always find that you are conflicted in your roles. And then one is bound to suffer. You get what I'm saying. You should try and find that balance becomes a challenge as a woman when you are in leadership and you are expected to work all the hours that is; early in the mornings and have late nights, but also you still have a family to take care of you have you have children to take care of.

Participants P1, PO3, and PO6 unanimously highlight the challenges women leaders face in balancing their professional responsibilities with their personal lives, particularly due to societal expectations and traditional gender roles. They emphasise that the lack of organisational support and understanding of these dual roles can lead

to burnout, compromised well-being, and, ultimately, the decision to leave the organisation in pursuit of a more fulfilling work-life balance.

4.4.2.3 The need for fair gender representation

This analysis of the data found that there is a necessity for fair representation in organisational culture. This involves identifying some of the reasons that may contribute to poor female representation in the organisation, such as social responsibilities that affect women in top management roles, and the fear of the unknown. It highlights how crucial it is to maintain gender equality and enhance the capacity of women to hold leadership positions (Adedeji, 2024). Most participants believe that female leaders should not have to adopt masculine traits to be successful. They emphasise the importance of supporting women and tapping into their feminine strengths. The participants discuss challenges faced by women in the workplace, such as perceived biases and higher expectations. They suggest identifying and promoting talented women and implementing initiatives to increase female representation. Nine participants share their insights to support this sub-theme.

P1

As women we need support, and I think that we need to do away with this notion that for a woman leader to be successful then they need to be masculine you know, be like a man. As women we are wired differently from men, and it is for that reason and we need to tap into our own strength and sometimes our strength is in our feminine side and we lead to with that feminine side that's who we are and it should not be discouraged and it should not be mocked because we are women and there are certain things we do differently from men.

P2

The Employment Equity policy is there. It is also dependent on particular positions that have been advertised, knowing that many people in the depots would not want all females working in the dev environment but in management. There is a possibility that it's a male who qualify. The policy allows them to be deployed so, if particular positions that have been advertised, knowing that

many people in the depots would not want more females working in the depot environment but in management, there is a possibility that if women do qualify, the policy allows them to be employed.

P3

... but the fact that it was it's accepted in this environment, which means management is behind it and also, unfortunately, at this organisation, is male dominated, so it's very it's not very visible what we see management is being supporting, what is it? The change management. I however know now recently there are some initiatives in recruitment to ensure that women are appointed as a priority, overtly subject to your quantification.

P4

So, the different programmes that are put in place and that they are that unit have been presented in and adopted at the board level. They have quarterly different programmes or activities. There's a committee that meets their different meetings. There are different awareness campaigns that they roll out. So that is what it is. It's like I said, it's approved from the board level, and it sits in the board committee's agenda to show the improvement in terms of how we are going forward in the implementation and what kind and who the type ...

P5

You need to deal with the issues around employment equity, so the institution needs to have that right, the representations. One for all genders and all races. So, the JRA obviously subscribes to that requirement that needs to and make sure that, uh, on all levels. Uh, we have the right representation, especially women, so the drives. I'm sure you would have seen lately that most of the appointments. Let's see, their management was the way ladies and specifically at the CEO's office and one of the HODs and communication.

PO3

I don't I don't think that there is any policy that would kind of force advancement of women into senior management positions, but yes, they are in enabling policies and those enabling policies also determine the organisational culture

and readiness, you know, for women to you know, to advance into senior manager management positions.

PO4

When a woman is a manager, is introduced, you still find some of the people who still have a very strong, a strong attitude towards being led by a woman or a lady, and then that tends to create a problems maybe sometimes, but I'm thinking as an organisation there must also be that strong support at the back end of any other male who's in the same position as the lady or the woman, or even higher, to be able to do that. Hey, this environment is too male dominated, and maybe it's uncomfortable. No, I think those are the things that we can do at the moment.

PO6

So, I think it's still reflecting that there's not a lot of representation of females within our structure, our structure is still very much male dominated. So, I don't think in my personal opinion, not even in a personal opinion, in in, in my view of the organisational structure, that there is a proper and the fair presentation of women.

PO7

They prevent it, pretty processes as well. They need to make sure that there's a balance, as well, and yeah, capacitate as women.

4.4.2.4 Gender disparity and women self-agency needs

Most participants, except participant PO4, made extensive and diverse contributions to this theme. Upon analysing the data set, various factors contributing to gender disparities in senior management positions were highlighted, in addition to the actions and needs related to women's self-agency in addressing these disparities. The theme encompasses discussions surrounding socialisation, qualifications, leadership challenges, affirmative action policies, mutual support among women, changing perceptions of women leaders, and the role of organisational support. It categorises

and organises data related to gender-related issues and women's efforts to overcome barriers in professional settings.

Participants articulated their belief that women have historically been perceived as followers but emphasised that they are now qualified and trained to be leaders, opposing this traditional perception. They stressed the importance of women taking up leadership positions and advocating for other women. Additionally, participants discussed the challenges they faced as women in leadership and highlighted the importance of women supporting and empowering each other. They also addressed the need for employee development policies customised to all staff members, emphasising the importance of self-motivation and continuous development for women to overcome these challenges. Furthermore, they touched on the impact of social roles and stereotypes in the workplace and underscored the need for empowering policies and actions specific to women.

P1

The challenges that I have experienced in a leadership role are, and I think to drill down to socialisation, people are different, people are being raised differently, and people are socialising differently; some people are patriarchal, men are patriarchal, some men would think a woman can't lead them because of how they have been raised and how they are socialising, some have a hard time in taking instructions from a woman, some have a hard time in a woman saying no to their ideas, laughing, so, iyaa ...

P2

I think at the present moment, there is much focus on gender equity, trying to ensure gender roles do not impact how women are considered. There is minimal impact or relationship between the social roles. And the ability of women in the meeting in senior management positions...

So, I am saying the police environment is available. However, whether it is being implemented to the letter must be interrogated. So, there must be affirmative action in policy intent to do that, not to create the policy, but to

create specific actions that empower women. Don't you create the policy but to create specifications that empower women to access.

PO3

Employing more women and number 2, retain more women now. It is challenging to talk of retention when entry itself is challenging.

PO4

Secondly, consistency, you know, when we deal with issues, all issues across the board, and you know the application of the rules should be consistent. The application of the laws should be consistent. People should have equal opportunity.

PO7

I have not seen any specific policy specifically targeted at women's development here; I have not seen anything that indicates what management is doing to develop women specifically; although we have employment equity, I do not think it has been implemented. We have not even. I do not even know ...

The participants express a shared concern about the persistence of gender disparities within the JRA, highlighting the influence of socialisation, the limited impact of existing policies, and the need for more proactive measures to empower women. They emphasise the importance of hiring and retaining women in the organisation, advocating for specific actions that create equal opportunities and a level playing field for women. Additionally, they stress the need for consistent policy implementation and a focus on targeted development initiatives specifically for women to ensure accurate gender equity in the workplace.

4.4.2.5 Lack of female leadership and representation

The study finds that there is a lack of women in leadership within the organisation as well as an overall lack of female representation within the organisation. Participants also emphasised the importance of having representative women in leadership within

the organisation so that other women can be supervised or have a visual representation of potential growth in leadership within the organisation itself. This is also related to the lack of women's leadership mentoring within the organisation, which can be deemed necessary for women's future development within the organisation. Almost all participants from the data set contributed extensively to the point.

P1

I think there are a small number of women in senior management, especially executive management. We still need more women at that level. Right now, they are not enough. Yaa ... we still need more women. I think we need more women. Right now, the representation is still quite small.

P2

There are very few women in job management positions in senior management in the JRA. So, I think there is a need for more affirmative action that deliberately targets appointing more women into senior management positions.

P3

... but the fact that it was it's accepted in this environment, which means management is behind it and also, unfortunately, at this organisation, is male dominated, so it's very it's not very visible what we see management is being supported what is it? The change management. I, however, know now that there are some initiatives in recruitment to ensure that women are appointed as a priority, overtly subject to your quantification.

P5

...Firstly, looking at gender issues as well, so it is unfortunate that at this stage the JRA we have senior management, it is more male-dominated, and one can understand perhaps it is a question of some of the fields are more ...

PO1

... very few. It is like one out of less than 5% of women addressed by it to, you know, to go up to a level which does not get one comfortable.

PO2

Yes, I was appointed there. That is why I have that knowledge. Maybe some women within the organisation even want to know about this because I was appointed to be part of the desk. We met only once. We were supposed to establish terms of reference. Then there was nothing happening moving forward. There was no champion for the desk or the papers of that committee, and it was only a once-off meeting. And it lapsed like that.

PO3

I don't, I don't think that there is any policy that would kind of force advancement of women into senior management positions, but yes, they are in enabling policies and those enabling policies also determine the organisational culture and readiness, you know, for women to you know, to advance into senior manager management positions...

PO5

To see women or JRA, female managers have moved from this level to that level or there is a directive that says we want to train, or we want to develop, or we want to mentor. I have never seen something like that.

PO6

So, I think it's still reflecting that there's not a lot of representation of females within our structure; our structure is still very much male-dominated. So, I don't think in my personal opinion, not even in a personal opinion, in my view of the organisational structure, that there is a proper and fair presentation of women.

PO7

... they prevent it, petty processes as well. They need to make sure that there is a balance, as well, and yeah, capacitate as women.

The perspectives mentioned emphasise the significance of women's empowerment, suggesting that they should not feel pressured to conform to traditional masculine traits to excel as leaders. Women possess distinct strengths rooted in their femininity that ought to be celebrated and harnessed. While Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) highlight the significance of gender disparity in top management and advocate for affirmative action, it is important to recognise that South Africa already has employment equity and affirmative action policies in place. However, policy alone is insufficient. There is a growing call for more targeted leadership development programmes for women, mentorship opportunities, and gender-sensitive organisational culture reforms. According to Al Chami and Youssef (2024), meaningful transformation requires not just compliance with EE targets but deliberate efforts to challenge the deeply embedded patriarchal norms within workplace culture and leadership pipelines. This includes inclusive leadership development that empowers women to lead authentically, without the pressure to conform to masculine norms.

4.4.2.6 The need for fair policy implementation

Data analysis revealed a perceived need for policy implementation addressing gender disparities within the organisation. Participants expressed a desire for equitable policies regarding the appointment and development of women, aiming to ensure fair representation and opportunity. The current context of the business, being male dominated with low female representation, suggests potential inequities in the distribution of opportunities for female employees. Seven participants explicitly confirmed this concern in their responses. However, it is crucial to consider the broader context of the industry when interpreting these findings.

The engineering sector, in which the organisation operates, is traditionally male dominated, with significantly lower representation of women compared to other fields. This context raises concerns about the effective implementation of employment equity and gender empowerment policies. Contributing factors may include unstable leadership, which can lead to inconsistent policy enforcement, or policy misalignment, where existing HR policies are not sufficiently geared toward supporting women's advancement and leadership development. Internal organisational practices may

also play a role in limiting progress. To better understand these dynamics, it is important to consider the broader industry context. As Wang et al., (2025) suggests, examining the proportion of women in the engineering industry provides a valuable benchmark. If the organisation's female representation aligns with or exceeds industry averages, it may indicate that internal policies are not overtly discriminatory but rather reflect broader structural challenges within the sector.

It is important to acknowledge that achieving a 50% representation of women in executive management positions may not be immediately feasible, particularly in industries with historically low female participation. Organisations cannot simply appoint women who are not present in the talent pool to meet arbitrary quotas. Instead, a more sustainable approach would involve addressing the root causes of gender disparities within the industry and implementing strategies to attract, retain, and develop female talent at all levels.

P1

I think it's has more to do with HR, because when you advertise a senior position you open it up and when you open it up in as much as you would put on your disclaimer that preference will be given to women and people with disabilities, and bla.. bla.. bla., but you have open it up and when you open it up, it means that all people everyone, male, black, white, Indian, coloureds then they will apply.

P2

Firstly, the requirements around the employment equity requirements that seek to achieve some gender parity within the organisation. Aaa ... so, the policy environment is there, but it's in practice it's a bit limited.

P3

Those rules that have to be managed. How you make decisions as well, it doesn't come automatically.

P4

So, the different programmes that are put in place and that they are that unit have been presented in and adopted at the board level. They have quarterly different programmes or activities. There's a committee that meets their different meetings. There are different awareness campaigns that they roll out. So that is what it is. It's like I said, it's approved from the board level, and it sits in the board committee's agenda to show the improvement in terms of how we are going forward in the implementation and what kind and who the type ...

P5

So, it has to start with the development either of a policy that's tough subscribe to the implement equity and the advertiser has to be specific in terms of what gender is being targeted for a particular position or maybe a policy that targets the development of women in the organisation.

PO1

Recruitment policy amendment should also be considered if that policy is considered instead of just looking at it.

P4

I'm saying we need support structures to have these discussions, roundtable discussions, as I've indicated, mentorship sessions, and awareness sessions. But we need to have these engagements so that women can understand their roles. In the forums, they need to understand their roles as women as opposed to becoming victims or units that are going to be used to advance patriarchy.

The participants are discussing the challenges women face as leaders in a male-dominated workplace. They mention the need for a clear recruitment policy that gives preference to women, but they also discuss the complexities of implementing such a policy. They emphasise the importance of job shadowing and mentorship in developing future leaders. They also highlight the need to challenge the idea that women leaders need to display male characteristics and emphasise the importance of embracing feminine strengths.

Participants mention the need for a succession plan and a policy that targets gender for certain positions. They comment on the importance of supporting women and creating a balanced environment. They also discussed the lack of awareness and support for employees in the organisation, and the need for the implementation of personal development plans and competency tests for managers. Finally, they mention the establishment of a women's desk to address women-related issues but acknowledge that the practice may still be a challenge. They suggest using exit forms to identify and address issues that hinder the retention of women.

4.4.2.7 Male-dominant industry

The data analysis indicates a perceived gender imbalance within JRA, with a predominance of male employees. This perception is primarily attributed to the organisation operating within a male-dominated industry, which participants suggest may have contributed to an underrepresentation of women, particularly in senior management. This sentiment was expressed by most participants, except Participant 2. Therefore, the data suggests that participants agree that women are underrepresented within the organisation, especially at higher levels.

However, it is important to note that this analysis is based on the opinions of the participants and does not necessarily reflect the objective reality of gender representation within the organisation or the industry (Hennekam & Dumazert, 2023). The participants feel that there is a patriarchal mindset that needs to be addressed and that talent among women needs to be identified and developed. They feel that there is a lack of representation and balance between men and women in the organisation. They mention the need for empowerment and opportunities for women to excel. The participants also mention biases and prejudices that women face in a male-dominated industry. To support the concern of bias and prejudice, the participants stated:

PO6

So obviously when you deal with males and you are a female, there's sort of biases that are and prejudices that are in people's minds to say you are a female and therefore you, I don't want to but there's a certain level of patriarchy

that you deal with when you were a female in a male-dominated industry, and therefore you have to fight that of.

PO7

I feel like I've probably had more impact in this role because I'm female, but also there has been negative, like I say, you have to deal with a lot of patriarchy, and they'll have to deal with a lot of prejudice on the basis that you are female. Then it's like I said, because it's a male-dominated industry, there's a lot of patriarchy, and there's a lot of condescending and uh, behaviours that you find.

PO7 and PO8's experiences highlight the urgent need to address the deeply ingrained patriarchal and cultural norms that create barriers for women in male-dominated industries. To foster a truly inclusive environment, the organisation must take a multi-faceted approach. This includes implementing mandatory unconscious bias training for all employees and specific training for leaders in recognising and addressing bias in their actions and decisions. Furthermore, the organisation needs to revise policies to ensure they promote gender equality, provide clear reporting mechanisms for discrimination, and support work-life balance with flexible work arrangements and family-friendly benefits.

Creating a culture of inclusion is crucial, and this can be achieved through mentorship programmes, employee resource groups, and a zero-tolerance policy for any form of harassment. Actively recruiting and promoting women at all levels, along with investing in leadership development programmes for women, will help break down barriers to advancement. Finally, the organisation must commit to measuring progress by collecting data on gender diversity, setting measurable goals for improvement, and publicly reporting on its efforts to create a workplace where women can thrive.

The findings suggest that gender disparity at the JRA is shaped by multiple, interconnected factors, including limited policy implementation, male-dominated organisational culture, and societal expectations that place additional caregiving and household responsibilities on women (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024; Adedeji, 2024;

Hennekam & Dumazert, 2023). Despite the existence of policies such as Employment Equity, their inconsistent application and lack of targeted initiatives for women limit career progression, reinforce patriarchal norms, and reduce female representation in senior management (Al Chami & Youssef, 2024; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). The study also indicates that socialisation, biases, and perceptions in male-dominated workplaces create additional barriers, affecting women's self-agency, retention, and ability to balance work and family responsibilities (Sánchez-Mira et al., 2022; Cohen-Hatton, 2023; Tucker, 2024). Collectively, these factors suggest that achieving meaningful gender equity requires not only policies but deliberate organisational efforts, including mentorship, targeted development programmes, and cultural reforms that recognise and value women's contributions in leadership roles.

However, despite the availability of development initiatives, participants noted that progression into leadership roles was not always linear, with some employees experiencing slower advancement despite similar levels of participation in development programmes. Some participants perceived those informal factors, beyond formal qualifications and training, may influence career progression outcomes.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Strategy development

This section analyses the organisation's strategies and approaches in relation to the development of its employees, focusing on addressing gender disparities in job roles and limited opportunities for women. It investigates the organisation's perception of specific job functions as more suitable for male employees. Participants underscored the importance of the organisation acknowledging these challenges and working with relevant staff to create strategies that promote gender equity in senior positions. Ultimately, two sub-themes emerged from this analysis: Gender disparity in job roles and limited opportunities for women.

4.4.3.1 Gender disparity in job roles

The study analysis revealed that participants perceived a gender disparity in job roles at JRA, particularly concerning tasks that involve intense physical labor. These tasks were often associated with male employees, potentially reflecting a societal bias regarding gender roles and physical capabilities. However, it is essential to acknowledge that individual differences exist within genders and that physical strength varies among individuals regardless of gender. While it is true that, on average, men tend to have greater muscle mass and upper body strength than women, this does not preclude women from performing physically demanding tasks (Bartolomei et al., 2021). Many women possess the physical capabilities required for such roles, and with proper training and support, they can excel in these positions.

Therefore, the organisation should focus on assessing individual abilities and providing equal opportunities for all employees, regardless of gender, to perform their qualified tasks. Onele (2023) explains how this strategy aligns with the principles of equity and equal treatment, assuring that everybody in the workforce has equal access to opportunities for career growth based on their skills and qualifications rather than gender preconceptions. Additionally, implementing targeted initiatives to groom and develop female employees for leadership roles can help to address the underrepresentation of women in senior positions and create a more diverse and inclusive workplace culture. This can involve providing mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership educational programmes created especially for women and creating a supportive environment that encourages women to pursue leadership roles (Onele, 2023).

P4

Maintain consistency, implement our plans, develop and senior management give information on sharing information. Have these different workshops. I think those are for me; they will retain those recommendations.

PO5

Then they can start working on that to try and uplift the current team of women who want to see themselves developed and occupying senior level. So, from

the element of umm. Moreover, I do not know why this term has just gone away. However, from the element of need identification and engagement with the relevant staff complement, they can identify what can assist the organisation in developing women and reaching the target they want. If they do not have a target or are just developing without it, I do not see them achieving anything.

The perceived gender disparities in the workplace, as highlighted by participants, raise concerns about potential barriers to women's career advancement within the organisation. While participants emphasised the need for support in balancing work and family responsibilities, a challenge faced by employees across genders, the specific impact of this challenge on women's attrition rates remains unclear at JRA (Kander, 2024). The suggestion to set targets for promoting women and actively engaging in their development is a positive step towards fostering gender equity. However, a comprehensive approach is necessary to address the root causes of gender disparities, including a thorough assessment of organisational culture and potential biases.

4.4.3.2 Limited opportunities for women

The study found disparities in the opportunities available to women within the organisation. It acknowledges that women may encounter obstacles to career advancement, such as gender bias and unequal access to leadership roles. Most participants believe that JRA needs to open more opportunities for women within the organisation to grow.

P3

We also need to groom our own young women coming up value systems because for me that is critical as well in our professional world because the world can be rough. So, you need to have a good identity in terms of your value system, how you dress, how you talk to men.

P4

Well, I don't think there's a specific thing in terms of retention. Mm, because retention is very subjective as well, but I think they are a number of elements that people would look into, specifically women.

First, to be given that opportunity because it gives you that confidence. That in such an environment, with the core business being what it is, you've got this opportunity, and you can run with it as a female.

P5

Uh, I'm not sure if in the JRA there is a policy guiding that except for the Employment Equity that we need to subscribe to.

PO2

They compete equally with their male counterparts, and nothing is being done to support women, especially implementing the approved programmes such as the gender audit and book project, ablutions for women while on-site, and others approved in 2021 to address the gender imbalance in 2021. Hence, I had said previously that even those women I believe are suitable for positions are not growing to take up those positions. So, there is no support to ensure that position became vacant or that more women are encouraged to close vacancies of management...

PO5

One might be the fact that a woman at the senior level is also beautiful to other organisations. So, their mobility is quite high in terms of finding other opportunities in other organisations purely on the basis that this country has not produced enough women who can then occupy the higher positions.

Limited representation of women in senior jobs within the organisation may be attributed to several factors, including external demand for qualified female leaders in a competitive market (merSETA, 2023). Given the historical underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, those who do reach senior positions may be highly sought after by other organisations, thereby increasing career mobility. This, coupled with the organisation operating in a male-dominated industry, presents unique

challenges in attracting and retaining female talent. While these external factors may pose difficulties for the organisation, they do not absolve it from addressing internal barriers to gender equity. Campos-Garcia (2022) asserts that organisations can take proactive measures to create a more welcoming work environment that supports the professional growth of women. This is supported by Thelma and Ngulube (2024), who state that this might include developing recruitment and growth programmes for women, offering mentorship and sponsorship possibilities, and addressing potential biases in performance evaluations and promotion decisions.

Participants further indicated that organisational support mechanisms were not always consistently applied, with variations in the quality and visibility of recognition across departments and leadership levels. This inconsistency affects how employees perceive organisational fairness and long-term career commitment

4.4.4 Theme 4: Support structures

Support structures have become a common finding in the study. These support structures encompass a range of strategies and resources designed to address the unique challenges and barriers that women may encounter in their career progression. Fundamentally, five sub-themes emerged from the data analysis of theme 4: assistance with studying, supporting women in leadership, career development/training, lack of mentoring and role induction, and a platform to be heard.

4.4.4.1 Assistance with studying

This sub-theme refers to a development strategy that is implemented within the JRA for their employees to get access to further study. The organisation allows its employees to go and study for both the organisation's and employees' benefit. This pertains to all genders and not just women. Support for further education and skill development is a fundamental aspect of these structures. The organisation offers employees, regardless of gender, opportunities to pursue additional studies, fostering continuous learning and professional growth. Few participants in the dataset shared their views on this sub-theme.

P1

The only thing I see happening is happening but across the board not only for females but for males as well is sponsoring their studies. If, for example, if I want to study further there is a provision within the organisation to be able to do that so they would obviously sponsor me financially to study my ... or whatever qualification I might want to pursue.

P2

People must take advantage of the education assistance programme because it helps them equip them for necessary skills. People must people must go on the executive development programs they aspire to be included as members and must take advantage of the education assistance programme because it will help to equip them with the necessary skills...

PO1

Even if you want to try to say to them you know, please just if the organisation supports you financially, why don't you register? I was there and took advantage.

PO2

So, I think finding a balance between my work and studies was my main challenge because I was in companies whereby, by the way, there were opportunities, but those opportunities needed a certain level of qualification, and I did not have enough time to, you know take time off and then start...

PO5

... OK. And leadership training, and it can be formal or informal; two people should attend a female and a managerial conference just to get a feel of how other organisations are managing to achieve the goals of a capacitating team, female managers we can be able to even benchmark with those particular organisations...

The participants desire further education and training opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge. They highlight the existing education assistance programme within the organisation, which allows employees to pursue further qualifications with financial support. However, they also identify challenges, such as balancing work and studies, and suggest that the organisation could do more to encourage employees to utilise these development opportunities. They emphasise the importance of both formal and informal leadership training and propose benchmarking with other organisations to gain insights into successful strategies for developing and empowering female managers.

4.4.4.2 Female leadership development

The data analysed found a need to support women in leadership. The participants believe that women interested in entering the space should receive additional support to ensure that the male-dominated space does not become oppressive to them. They should be given support to shine and foster a culture of an equitable workforce. They hope that support will be available behind the scenes to help women pursue their goals in this field. Participant 04 believes that the organisation actively supports and promotes women's participation in leadership positions. The other participants were not able to respond to this question.

PO4

... But I think if there's women who are interested in being into the space, the there's a bit of more support that should be given to them as support...

... So, I am hoping they support, they will surely be at this moment when somebody is there, and as a female or as a woman, there is a small quantity of more support on the background to make sure that the male-dominated space does not become too much, a power or too much strong for them actually to exercise what they want to do... I am not implying that women are incapable. However, rather, they need support and development to be fully competitive to excel in their duties in a male-dominated world.

The finding suggests that while women are interested in and capable of succeeding in male-dominated spaces, they require additional support to navigate and overcome the challenges these environments pose. The participant emphasises that this support is not due to a lack of capability in women, but rather to counter potential power imbalances and biases inherent in male-dominated industries.

4.4.4.3 Career development/training

Another key finding from the study suggests that JRA is trying to enhance employees' skills, competencies, and career prospects through structured training programmes and development initiatives. These efforts reflect an organisational commitment to fostering an enabling environment that supports professional growth, particularly for women. While these initiatives are still developing, there is evidence that JRA is actively seeking to accommodate and empower its employees. Participants also expressed a clear need for more targeted support, especially for women, to equip them with the knowledge, confidence, and tools to excel in their current roles and progress into leadership positions.

P2

People must take advantage of the education assistance programme because it helps equip them for necessary skills. People must go on the executive development programs they aspire to be included as members and must take advantage of the education assistance programme because it will help to equip them with the necessary...

P3

We maybe men or the organisation is not supportive enough. So, lack of support becomes an obstacle. Also, another issue is budgets. For instance, if they we don't have adequate budgets to support women programmes, training them, empowering them, you know. Or limited opportunities as well as being a family of a number of MOEs of the municipal entities. We need to have some engagements or discussions at that level where we say to these ten women that we want them to have experience as electricians, which is typically men

traditionally, right? Know, so if there is no platform where our managers or leaders ...

PO2

So, it's up to me then to not just complain about maybe the lack of policies or maybe the culture of not empowering women, but instead of complaining, I must see how to widen my experience to empower myself. Even if it means maybe I will grow outside. Yeah, but challenges are always there. I think it's how you manage, you manage them or maybe look at how do you then turn them to, you know, opportunities for you to learn something.

The responses cited reveal the complex interactions among factors affecting the progression of women in JRA (Adongo et al., 2023). Participants highlighted challenges such as insufficient support, budget constraints, and perceived deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes as barriers to achieving gender equality. However, there was an intense focus on meaningful discussions at the leadership level and on aggressively creating opportunities for women to climb the leadership ladder (Bracken et al., 2023). Participants emphasised the significance of women taking charge of their empowerment through continuous learning and development. While acknowledging the limitations within the JRA, they highlighted the agency's provisions for extended learning as a potential avenue for women to enhance their skills and knowledge.

The suggestion of joint City Power training opportunities for male and female employees in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as electrical work, emerged as a promising strategy for promoting gender equality. It would also help women advance their careers. This approach aims to create a more level playing field by ensuring women have equal access to technical skills and knowledge, broadening their career prospects within the JRA.

4.4.4.4 Lack of mentoring and role induction

Data suggest that JRA lacks mentorship programmes and induction for women within the organisation, which poses a barrier. This sub-theme suggests a lack of induction

and training after the appointment of women, which can advance their development within the organisation. This finding highlights the absence of formal mentoring programmes and comprehensive role induction for women employees. It highlights the struggles women face in finding mentors, particularly in male-dominated industries, and the need for effective onboarding processes (Maguire et al., 2024).

P1

So I, think women need to be supported especially when you start at an organisation and in JRA you are just thrown into the deep end and you are expected to float and I don't think it is fair and I think people need to be supported and people need to be inducted and beyond induction because there is a lot of processes and procedures that one needs to learn, so expecting someone to know those processes and procedures when coming from outside it's not fair. So, I think that kind of support is needed...

The participants emphasised the need for support and development programmes for women in the JRA. They expressed feelings of being out of their depth, not receiving adequate guidance, and experiencing isolation. Mentorship, training, and induction programmes were highlighted as crucial for empowering women to succeed and advance in their careers. Additionally, participants suggested that taking on challenging roles, even without immediate financial reward, could provide valuable experience and open doors for future career growth.

P1

... Support them, support women; I think many women in senior management need support, ja... we need much support. It feels like we are on our own and are just made to figure things out for ourselves. Support us, empower us by supporting us...

P4

... Another element is issues of training and development, you know...

PO2

They just want to monitor you. Have fulfilment. Sometimes, some positions do not come with money, but you can grab that opportunity without compensation if you are willing to grow. Just take it because you know that you want to call and gain knowledge and experience. Then, you get experience and are ready to apply for a higher position. So, there have always been challenges, but I think what has worked for me is finding a balance to say OK

4.4.4.5 A platform to hear

The participants in the study indicated that they would need a platform where they could voice their collective concerns and the needs they required from the organisation to develop. This explicitly speaks to the need for women to have a platform to raise gender-related issues and to create fair gender representation within the organisation. This component emphasises the need to provide women with a dedicated platform or forum to express their concerns, experiences, and gender-related issues within the organisation. It serves as a means for women to articulate their specific needs and advocate for gender equity and inclusion. Only one participant commented on this question.

PO1 contributed thus:

So, we need a platform, it be a round table, a forum, a once in month type of gathering or it can be getting someone from outside to come and speak to us as women and motivate us or something like that. It can be all. We need a platform to voice out all these things we feel will improve our working life as women in the JRA and advance our careers and possibly remain with the organisation.

... support them, support women. I think many women in senior management need support, ja ... we need much support. It feels like we are on our own and are just made to figure things out for ourselves. Support us, empower us by supporting us

... you know, if I am in an environment whereby my ideas and my work matter, I'm heard and seen. I'm supported, and chances are I'm going to stick around,

so more support I think that's what we need, and also given a sense that what we do matters, the work that I do matters, is not just that by the way it is a work that really matters, and that has to come from above.

This participant suggests that the organisation needs to actively support women to improve female employee retention. This includes providing a supportive environment where their ideas and work matter, as well as creating a sense that their work is meaningful. They also emphasised the need for support for work-life balance and suggested creating a platform, such as a roundtable discussion or forum, where women in senior management can voice their concerns and support each other. The participants expressed a desire for a platform to voice their concerns, as they feel none is currently available.

The findings indicate that support structures within JRA play a critical role in facilitating women's career progression, yet they are inconsistently implemented and often generic rather than gender specific. While education assistance, career development programs, and leadership training exist, women still face barriers such as a lack of mentoring, inadequate role induction, and limited platforms to voice their concerns, which constrain their agency and advancement in male-dominated environments (Adongo et al., 2023; Maguire et al., 2024; Bracken et al., 2023). These findings suggest that although the organisation provides resources for professional growth, there is a need for targeted initiatives that specifically empower women, such as mentorship, induction programs, and advocacy forums. Integrating these findings with theoretical frameworks on gender equity and organisational support underscores the importance of structural and relational mechanisms in transforming policy intentions into tangible outcomes, enabling women to exercise agency, overcome systemic barriers, and thrive in leadership roles.

Despite the presence of mentorship and developmental structures, access to these opportunities appears to depend on informal networks and visibility within the organisation, which may limit equal participation across all employees. Some participants suggested that women may have less consistent access to mentorship opportunities due to structural or relational dynamics within the organisation.

4.5 THEORETICAL INTEGRATION AND REFLECTION

4.5.1 The need for fair policy implementation

The findings indicate a need for policies that address gender disparities within the organisation. Participants highlighted that although frameworks such as employment equity exist, their implementation is inconsistent, limiting their effectiveness. HCT posits that investments in skills, training, and mentorship enhance career outcomes, and the findings confirm that targeted recruitment, succession planning, and development programmes for women are essential (Garvey & Jones, 2021). However, the findings also suggest that HCT alone cannot fully explain the challenges observed. Structural and cultural barriers, including unstable leadership and misaligned organisational practices, influence the translation of policy into equitable opportunities. The findings highlight that equitable representation requires systematic efforts to attract, develop, and retain female talent, alongside policies that address broader structural challenges in the engineering sector (Ainane et al., 2019).

4.5.2 Male-dominant industry

Participants emphasised that the male-dominated nature of the engineering sector contributes significantly to the underrepresentation of women, especially in senior management positions. They reported experiencing patriarchal attitudes, gender biases, and condescending behaviour that limits career progression (Hennekam & Dumazert, 2023). From the perspective of HCT, access to social capital, such as mentorship and professional networks, is critical for career advancement (Garvey & Jones, 2021). While women possess the necessary skills and qualifications, structural and cultural barriers prevent them from fully benefiting from these investments (Hennekam & Dumazert, 2023).

4.5.3 Strategy development

4.5.3.1 Gender disparity in job roles

The findings revealed a perception that certain positions, particularly those involving physically demanding tasks, are more suitable for men (Bartolomei et al., 2021). This reflects societal assumptions rather than actual ability, as many women possess the

capacity to perform these tasks. HCT supports investment in training and development to equip women for leadership and technical roles (Garvey & Jones, 2021). Nevertheless, persistent gendered assumptions indicate that skills development alone cannot overcome structural inequities. Targeted initiatives such as mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership programmes for women are necessary to address underrepresentation in senior positions (Onele, 2023).

4.5.3.2 Limited opportunities for women

Participants reported that women face fewer opportunities for career advancement despite being qualified and experienced (merSETA, 2023). HCT highlights the role of education, skills, and social networks in enabling career progression, confirming the importance of mentorship and development initiatives for female employees (Garvey & Jones, 2021). However, organisational culture, external demand for skilled women, and competition for limited leadership positions continue to create barriers (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). The findings suggest that proactive strategies such as leadership development, mentoring, and targeted promotion of women are essential to ensure that human capital investments result in equitable career advancement (Onele, 2023).

4.5.4 Support structures

4.5.4.1 Assistance with studying

Participants identified education support programmes as a key enabler of career progression, which aligns with HCT's focus on investment in knowledge and skills (Garvey & Jones, 2021). While financial support for further study exists, participants noted challenges such as balancing work and study. Providing structured guidance and linking educational opportunities to career development could enhance the impact of these human capital investments.

4.5.4.2 Female leadership development

Participants highlighted the need for targeted support for women entering leadership roles. HCT suggests that access to mentorship, networks, and development programmes enhances career outcomes (Garvey & Jones, 2021). Participants

emphasised that barriers in male-dominated environments are structural rather than indicative of women's capabilities (Onele, 2023).

4.5.4.3 Career development/training

Structured training and development programmes were seen as critical in enhancing skills and career prospects. HCT frames these initiatives as investments in human capital (Garvey & Jones, 2021), yet participants noted limitations such as insufficient support, budget constraints, and organisational biases (Brayne & Moffitt 2022; Fernandez, 2023). Strategies, including joint training opportunities, benchmarking with other organisations, and equitable access for women, can mitigate structural barriers and support leadership development.

4.5.4.4 Lack of mentoring and role induction

Participants reported a lack of formal mentoring and induction for women, limiting career development opportunities (Maguire et al., 2024). HCT emphasises the importance of social capital through mentorship and networking (Garvey & Jones, 2021). The findings indicate that without structured support, women struggle to navigate organisational processes, highlighting a gap between policy intent and practice. Formal mentoring and induction programmes would strengthen support for women and enable equitable access to leadership opportunities.

4.5.4.5 A platform to hear

Participants expressed the need for platforms to voice concerns and advocate for gender equity, reflecting HCT's recognition of social capital and networks as enablers of career progression (Garvey & Jones, 2021). The findings show that without organisational responsiveness, human capital investment alone is insufficient. Establishing such platforms can support retention, engagement, and equitable advancement of women within the organisation.

4.6 SUMMARY

In this chapter, the researcher presents the results of a data analysis focused on women's advancement and retention in high-level managerial positions. A case study approach, focusing on the JRA, was followed to explore how women can be empowered to thrive in leadership roles. 67% of the participants were females, whereas 33% were males. The participants had different years of experience working at the senior management level, which might impact the study's findings (Kim & Asbury, 2020). The researcher concludes that it is essential to consider the participants' experience levels when interpreting the study results and making recommendations based on the findings.

In addition, this chapter details the qualitative data analysis approach and processes utilised in Atlas.ti 23. This data was collected through interviews with the JRA's senior management team members and consisted of transcripts. Four themes and nineteen sub-themes were discovered and utilised to structure the results of the study. Direct quotations were included to reinforce these themes and sub-themes (Graells et al., 2022). Overall, the findings reveal that the JRA struggles with promoting and retaining women in senior management positions, leading to a lack of female representation in positions of authority. Various support systems were proposed to address this issue, including educational assistance, leadership and career development, mentorship and role modelling, and a platform for women's voices to be heard. These results will be further discussed in Chapter 5, while Chapter 6 presents the study's conclusions, recommendations, and proposals for improvement.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the findings presented in Chapter 4 by interpreting them in relation to HCT and empowerment theory, as well as existing literature on career development, organisational support, and gender dynamics. The discussion further explores how these findings address the study objectives and research questions.

While Human Capital Theory provides a useful lens for understanding how investments in education, training, mentoring, and leadership development contribute to career advancement, the findings are also interpreted through Kabeer's Empowerment Framework. From this perspective, women's career progression is influenced not only by human capital investments but also by their access to organisational resources, their agency to make and act upon career-related decisions, and the achievements that result from these opportunities. Accordingly, each theme is discussed in relation to the extent to which organisational structures and practices enabled or constrained access to resources, supported the exercise of agency, and facilitated career advancement outcomes. This integrated perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping women's progression into senior management positions within the JRA.

The empowerment framework is used as a complementary lens to understand how organisational structures, workplace culture, and access to opportunities shape women's agency, participation, and progression into senior management positions within JRA (Marginson, 2019).

Based on the data analysis, four key themes emerged as central to understanding the challenges affecting the development and retention of senior female managers at JRA, namely, career development, gender disparity, strategy development, and support structures. These themes were identified and refined in line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis approach.

5.2 CAREER DEVELOPMENT

This thematic finding directly pertains to the first research question, which investigates the factors hindering the development and retention of executive-level personnel at the JRA. The convergence of participant narratives and existing literature provides insight into the challenges affecting women's career progression within the organisation.

The findings indicate that only 33% of senior management positions at JRA are occupied by women, reflecting a persistent gender imbalance in leadership representation. This aligns with broader global trends, as the United Nations (2020) similarly reports that women occupy approximately one-third of senior leadership positions worldwide. The persistence of this disparity suggests that despite formal commitments to employment equity, meaningful transformation in leadership representation remains limited.

From a CHT perspective (Becker, 1964), organisational investment in employee development is expected to enhance productivity and career advancement. However, the findings indicate that unequal access to development opportunities limits the accumulation of human capital among female employees, thereby constraining their progression into senior leadership roles. This suggests that human capital development alone is insufficient to ensure equitable career outcomes when access to opportunities is uneven. Similarly, from an empowerment perspective (Baran and Zarzycki, 2021; Du Plessis and Barkhuizen, 2015), limited access to developmental opportunities constrains women's agency, professional confidence, and ability to progress into leadership positions. This highlights the importance of not only providing development opportunities but ensuring equitable access to them across employee groups.

The findings also indicate that the absence of tailored leadership development programmes for women, combined with limited structured mentorship and succession processes, may further restrict leadership progression. Participants emphasised the importance of mentorship, job shadowing, and structured career development pathways in preparing women for senior roles.

In addition, leadership instability was identified as a factor that may weaken the consistency and sustainability of gender equity initiatives. Frequent leadership changes may disrupt the implementation of development programmes and reduce the organisation's focus on long-term transformation objectives.

The findings therefore suggest that limited access to tailored leadership development programmes, mentorship, and structured career pathways constrains the accumulation of leadership competencies among women in senior management positions. From an HCT perspective, this weakens leadership development opportunities and limits the organisation's capacity to fully realise employee potential. Similarly, from an empowerment perspective, restricted access to developmental opportunities reduces women's agency, confidence, and progression into senior management roles. This indicates that human capital investment alone is insufficient to ensure equitable career progression without addressing structural and informal organisational barriers.

The findings indicate that women in male-dominated environments at JRA face persistent barriers shaped by socialisation, gender biases, and patriarchal norms. Participants described experiences of social exclusion, stereotypes about women's roles, and subtle discrimination, which impede their professional growth and participation in leadership spaces. This aligns with Sánchez-Mira et al. (2022) who note that early socialisation influences attitudes toward gender roles and occupational choices, often reinforcing inequalities. Additionally, Thelma and Ngulube (2024) argue that societal norms and stereotypes limit women's opportunities in leadership positions, while Tucker (2024) emphasises that structural and policy interventions, such as mentorship and inclusive initiatives, are necessary to address these challenges. In the JRA context, although employment equity policies exist, participants' accounts suggest that patriarchal attitudes and male-dominated networks continue to hinder women's advancement, highlighting a gap between policy intent and lived organisational realities.

5.3 GENDER DISPARITY

The findings indicate that career progression is positively associated with participation in structured development programmes, mentorship, and leadership training. This supports HCT, which links skills acquisition to upward mobility.

This theme relates to research question 3, which examines the impact of women's social roles on their advancement and retention in senior management roles at JRA. The theme of gender disparity shows how social expectations and gender roles influence women's careers. The analysis sheds light on a central theme academic and policy discussions: gender disparity in positions of authority, particularly in male-dominated industries. This finding aligns with those who highlight the persistent structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's access to leadership roles globally. While the South African legal framework strictly prohibits unjust discrimination based on race, gender, or sex as reinforced in legal scholarship by Smith and Sinkford (2022), the lived experiences shared by participants suggest that women's underrepresentation in leadership may also be shaped by perceptions of subtle bias, organisational culture, and the slow pace of transformation, rather than direct or intentional acts of discrimination (Chikwe et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings suggest that while HCT explains the role of skills development in enabling career mobility, it does not fully account for the influence of entrenched organisational structures and social expectations that shape career outcomes.

The findings therefore indicate that career progression is not determined solely by formal qualifications or training but is also shaped by informal organisational dynamics such as visibility, perception, and access to influential networks. These dynamics may contribute to unequal advancement opportunities for women, particularly in leadership pipelines where representation remains limited.

After three decades of employment equity and affirmative action policies, it is difficult to attribute gender imbalances in leadership purely to unjust discrimination. Rather, these disparities are often the result of complex and interrelated factors, including lingering gender stereotypes, unequal access to informal networks and mentorship,

and perceptions of leadership roles as inherently masculine (Smith, 2025). As such, addressing women's leadership underrepresentation requires not only compliance with formal policy but also a deeper cultural shift within organisations and sustained efforts to transform institutional practices and perceptions.

From an empowerment perspective, the findings suggest that gender disparities within JRA are shaped by unequal access to opportunities, organisational resources, and leadership influence. The empowerment framework highlights how women's agencies may be constrained by institutional practices, workplace culture, and socially constructed gender expectations. Participants' experiences suggest that although formal policies exist, structural and cultural barriers may continue to influence women's progression into senior management positions.

Similarly, HCT suggests that organisations benefit when skills, qualifications, and leadership capabilities are fully utilised and developed. However, where women experience limited access to leadership opportunities, informal networks, mentorship, or development pathways, the organisation risks underutilising available human capital. This may weaken organisational capacity to build a diverse and sustainable leadership pipeline within JRA.

The findings suggest that gaps may exist between formal policy commitments and practical implementation within JRA. Participants highlighted the importance of leadership accountability, organisational commitment, and monitoring systems to improve policy implementation and workplace inclusivity (Chikwe et al., 2024).

The findings suggest that work–family responsibilities continue to shape women's leadership experiences and may indirectly influence career advancement opportunities. Participants perceived that organisational structures may not always sufficiently accommodate the dual responsibilities frequently experienced by women leaders. This may contribute to slower career progression and reinforce existing gender disparities in leadership representation (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

From an empowerment perspective, organisational barriers restricted women's access to critical resources, including sponsorships, leadership opportunities, influential networks, and career development support. These constraints limited

participants' agency by reducing their ability to influence career decisions, competing for advancement opportunities, and exercise leadership within the organisation. As a result, achievements such as promotions, career progression, and leadership attainment were often delayed or hindered, illustrating the interconnected nature of resources, agency, and outcomes in women's career development.

5.4 STRATEGY FOR DEVELOPMENT

This section examines the extent to which organisational strategies related to career development, retention, and leadership progression are effective in addressing gender disparities and supporting the advancement of women into senior management positions.

This theme addresses research question 4 by identifying organisational strategies aimed at improving the advancement, retention, and representation of women in senior management positions at JRA. The findings indicate that strengthening women's progression into leadership requires intentional organisational mechanisms that enhance access to structured development opportunities, leadership exposure, and career progression pathways. Participants consistently emphasised that career advancement is closely dependent on institutional support systems that enable continuous skills development and professional growth within the organisation (JRA, 2023b).

This finding concurs with Mcilongo and Strydom (2021), who argue that structured mentorship and leadership development programmes are essential for improving women's progression into senior roles. Similarly, Adedeji (2024) highlights that organisational support structures significantly influence women's career mobility, particularly in environments where leadership development processes are not formally structured. This suggests that JRA's current developmental systems play a critical role in shaping women's access to leadership opportunities.

The findings further indicate that women's career progression is constrained by limited advancement opportunities, insufficient organisational support, and resource constraints. These barriers reflect systemic limitations in talent development and

succession planning processes rather than individual capability deficits. This resonates with Adedeji (2024), who emphasises that organisational structures and workplace cultures often reproduce gender inequality by limiting women's access to strategic roles and decision-making spaces. Participants also noted that lack of confidence, fear of exclusion, and gender stereotyping continue to influence women's experiences in leadership positions.

These findings suggest that both structural and socio-cultural factors interact to restrict women's progression into senior management. The presence of such barriers implies that gender inequality is embedded not only in formal HR systems but also in informal organisational norms that shape inclusion and participation. This highlights the need for interventions that address both organisational structures and workplace culture simultaneously.

Retention of senior female managers emerged as another significant concern, as participants indicated that experienced women are often recruited by external organisations offering better advancement prospects. This reflects weaknesses in internal career development systems and limited retention mechanisms. This finding concurs with Mcilongo and Strydom (2021), who argue that the absence of clear succession pathways increases turnover risk among skilled employees. It also resonates with JRA (2023b), which emphasises the importance of structured career development systems in retaining critical human resources. The findings suggest that strengthening internal career pathways, recognition systems, and succession planning is essential for retaining skilled female managers and ensuring leadership continuity within the organisation.

Using the HCT perspective (Becker, 1964), these findings indicate that women's limited progression into senior management is linked to unequal organisational investment in their development. HCT posits that individuals acquire skills, knowledge, and competencies through education, training, and experiential learning, thereby enhancing their productivity and career advancement prospects. In the context of JRA, the findings suggest that unequal access to mentorship, leadership training, and development opportunities constrains the accumulation of human capital

among female employees. This results in slower progression into senior management positions compared to their male counterparts.

This aligns with HCT, which emphasises that organisational investment in employee development directly influences career outcomes and organisational performance (Becker, 1964). Therefore, strengthening structured mentorship programmes, leadership development initiatives, and succession-linked training pathways represents a strategic investment in human capital that can improve both gender equity in leadership and overall organisational effectiveness (JRA, 2023b; Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021; Adedeji, 2024).

Collectively, the findings indicate that while the organisation has mechanisms to support career development and retention, the effectiveness of these strategies is constrained by uneven access to opportunities and the continued influence of informal organisational practices. This suggests a gap between formal strategic intent and practical implementation in addressing gender disparities in leadership progression.

This theme reflects the central role of agency within Kabeeer's Empowerment Framework. Participants demonstrated agency through proactive career planning, continuous learning, networking, and efforts to overcome organisational challenges. While access to organisational resources supported these actions, participants often relied on their own initiative to identify and pursue advancement opportunities. The exercise of agency contributed to achievements, such as increased professional visibility, leadership readiness, and career progression, highlighting the importance of individual action in translating resources into positive career outcomes.

5.5 SUPPORT STRUCTURES

This theme addresses research question 2, which explores the challenges women face in senior management positions at JRA. The findings indicate that the lack of structured, targeted support systems significantly impairs women's ability to navigate leadership roles effectively. Participants emphasised that support structures are essential for enabling career progression, as they provide both practical and socio-

emotional assistance that facilitates women's adjustment and growth within senior positions (Dagunduro et al., 2024).

This finding concurs with Dagunduro et al. (2024), who argue that support structures play a critical role in addressing barriers experienced by women in leadership by providing resources such as mentorship, career guidance, and organisational support mechanisms. Similarly, Bishu and Headley (2020) highlight that inclusive organisational systems are essential for promoting gender equity, particularly where women continue to experience structural disadvantages in leadership pathways.

This aligns with HCT, which emphasises that organisational performance improves when employees' skills and capabilities are systematically developed and supported through structured development pathways. In this context, the absence of targeted support may limit the effective development and utilisation of women's leadership potential within the organisation.

The data further reveal that existing organisational support systems at JRA are largely general in nature and not specifically tailored to address gender-specific challenges. While the organisation provides access to development opportunities such as further study support, employee assistance programmes, and leadership training initiatives, these are available to all employees regardless of gender. Participants indicated that although these systems exist, they do not adequately address the specific barriers women in senior management positions face.

This resonates with Kela et al. (2024), who argue that equal access to organisational resources does not automatically result in equity, as different groups experience organisational systems differently. The findings suggest that women may still experience gaps in support despite the presence of formal development structures, particularly in relation to career progression, leadership confidence, and workplace inclusion.

From an HCT perspective, this suggests that non-differentiated development programmes may not fully optimise leadership capability development, as they do not sufficiently account for uneven access to opportunities and contextual barriers affecting career progression (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021).

In addition, participants highlighted the absence of a dedicated platform for female managers to collectively voice concerns, share experiences, and advocate for gender equity within the organisation. The lack of such a structured platform suggests limited opportunities for collective representation and support among women in leadership positions. This finding indicates that informal or individualised support mechanisms may be insufficient in addressing systemic gender-related challenges within the organisation.

The findings further suggest that the absence of targeted support structures may contribute to reduced job satisfaction, weakened sense of belonging, and limited career progression for female managers. Participants emphasised that meaningful engagement, recognition, and organisational responsiveness to women's needs are important for retention and leadership development. This indicates that support structures are not only developmental tools but also critical retention mechanisms within the organisation.

Where structured developmental and relational support is limited, there is a risk of underutilising available leadership capacity, which may negatively affect both individual progression and the organisation's ability to fully realise its human capital investment.

Overall, the findings indicate that while formal organisational support structures exist within JRA, they are largely generic and do not fully address the specific challenges faced by women in senior management positions. The effectiveness of these structures is therefore limited by their non-targeted design and uneven responsiveness to gendered workplace realities. This suggests a gap between the existence of support systems and their practical ability to enhance women's leadership development, inclusion, and retention.

The finding regarding support structures (HR strategies) further reinforces the relationship among resources, agency, and achievement. HR interventions such as succession planning, mentoring programmes, leadership development initiatives, and equitable promotion practices function as organisational resources that create opportunities for advancement. When effectively implemented, these strategies strengthen women's agency by enabling them to participate more actively in career

decision-making and leadership development processes. Ultimately, enhanced access to resources and greater agency increase the likelihood of positive achievements, including promotion, leadership attainment, and long-term career success.

5.6 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyse the factors hindering the progress and retention of women in senior management roles at JRA. The research findings reveal that several challenges hinder the development and retention of senior female managers at JRA, including career development, gender disparity, growth strategy, and support structures. These challenges are compounded by societal conditioning, biases, and perceptions that influence how women are assessed and perceived in the workplace.

To address these challenges, JRA must continue challenging societal norms and stereotypes and promote inclusivity and gender equality in all organisational areas. This can be achieved through policies and programmes that ensure equal pay, equal opportunities, and equal treatment for all employees, regardless of gender. Additionally, JRA should invest in training and development programmes that promote gender equality and workplace inclusivity. By taking these steps, JRA can create a more equitable and fairer workplace for all employees, crucial in achieving workplace equity, equal development opportunities for women, and the respect that all employees deserve.

This study's findings underscore the importance of promoting diversity and inclusivity in the workplace, particularly in leadership and management positions. To overcome the challenges hindering the development and retention of senior female managers at JRA, concerted efforts by all stakeholders, including the organisation's management, employees, and policymakers, are needed to establish a more egalitarian and inclusive workplace, policymakers are required (Dagunduro, et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the study offers insights into the difficulties that hinder the development and retention of senior female managers at JRA (Ituma et al., 2024). The findings shed light on the need for more concerted efforts to promote diversity and inclusivity in the workplace and provide recommendations for integrating women into senior management roles at JRA. The study's findings and recommendations can be used by policymakers, organisations, and other stakeholders to promote gender equality and inclusivity in the workplace, ultimately leading to a more equitable and fairer society. The study highlighted barriers to the development and retention of senior female managers at JRA, underscoring the importance of support structures such as mentorship programs, leadership development initiatives, and platforms for women to voice their concerns. It showed that inconsistent policy implementation limited the advancement of women. These findings can be applied by policymakers and organisational leaders to develop gender-sensitive strategies, improve recruitment and retention practices, and create more inclusive organisational cultures, helping women progress in their careers and promoting gender equality in the workplace.

CHAPTER 6: ANSWERS TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION TO THE STUDY

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the study's conclusions and recommendations based on the findings discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. The chapter summarises the key findings in relation to the research objectives and research questions, with particular focus on the development and retention of women in senior management positions at JRA. The chapter provides recommendations aimed at strengthening career development, organisational support, leadership progression, and gender equity within the organisation, in addition, the study's contribution to knowledge is highlighted, together with suggestions for future research.

6.2 ANSWERS TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to address four key research questions that guided the investigation into the development and retention of women in senior management positions at JRA. The findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5 provide insight into the organisational, structural, and socio-cultural factors influencing women's career progression within the organisation.

6.2.1 What factors obstruct the development and retention of women in top Management roles at JRA?

The research findings indicate that several interrelated factors obstruct the development and retention of women in senior management positions at JRA. These include limited access to structured mentorship and leadership development opportunities, gender disparities within organisational structures, insufficient targets support mechanisms, and the influence of organisational culture and societal gender expectations.

Participants highlighted that although development initiatives exist within the organisation, many are general in nature and not specifically designed to address the unique challenges experienced by women in leadership positions. The findings further suggest that limited access to mentorship, coaching, networking opportunities, and structured succession pathways may constrain women’s career progression and long-term retention with the organisation.

In addition, the findings indicate that informal organisational dynamics, including perceptions of bias, limited inclusion in influential networks, and workplace culture, continue to influence women’s advancement into senior management roles.

Table 6.1 presents the key factors identified as obstructing the development and retention of women in senior management positions at JRA. These factors emerged through thematic analysis and are supported by the literature on women in leadership, HCT, and organisational gender dynamics.

Table 6.1: Factors obstructing the development and retention of women in senior management

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Unconscious bias and stereotypes	Gender-based assumptions about leadership suitability and commitment levels.
Lack of mentorship and sponsorship	Limited access to networks and senior figures who advocate for women's careers.
STEM Sector gender gap	Underrepresentation of women in technical fields critical to leadership roles.
Safety concerns	Hostile work environment that discourages retention.
Discriminatory promotion practices	Gender disparities in performance evaluation and advancement opportunities.
Limited leadership training access	Fewer tailored opportunities for leadership development and capacity building
Work-life imbalance	Inflexible work arrangements and caregiving responsibilities disproportionately affecting women
Organisational culture	Predominantly male dominated environments that marginalise female voices

Source: Developed by the researcher from study findings and literature review (2025)

6.2.2 What challenges do women face when appointed to senior management Positions in JRA?

The findings indicate that women in senior management positions at JRA face organisational and professional challenges within a predominantly male environment. Participants identified limited access to mentorship, insufficient support for leadership development, restricted professional exposure, and limited inclusion in influential organisational networks as significant barriers to their effectiveness and progression in leadership roles.

The findings further suggest that workplace culture, perceptions of leadership, and inconsistent implementation of gender equity initiatives may contribute to feelings of exclusion and reduced professional support among women leaders. These challenges may negatively affect leadership confidence, career progression, and long-term retention within the organisation.

6.2.3 How do women's social roles affect their development and retention position of senior management?

The findings indicate that women's social and caregiving responsibilities continue to influence their development and retention in senior management positions. Participants highlighted that women often balance demanding professional responsibilities alongside caregiving and family-related obligations, which may affect their availability for networking, travel, and extended work commitments. The findings further suggest that societal expectations and traditional gender role perceptions may indirectly influence how organisational environments perceive women's leadership commitment and career progression. These dynamics may contribute to slower career advancement, reduced access to leadership opportunities, and continued underrepresentation of women in senior management positions.

6.2.4 What HR strategies can be recommended to facilitate the integration and support of women in top management positions within JRA?

The findings revealed limited evidence of structured succession planning processes specifically designed to advance women into senior management positions at JRA. This may contribute to the continued underrepresentation of women in executive leadership and highlights gaps in leadership development and retention practices within the organisation.

The study identified succession planning as an important strategic mechanism for supporting the development, integration and retention of women in senior management positions. Participants emphasised the importance of structured leadership pathways, mentorship, career development opportunities, and leadership continuity in strengthening women's progression into executive roles.

The findings further suggest that integrating diversity and inclusion principles into succession planning processes may strengthen organisational sustainability by expanding leadership opportunities for women, improving talent retention, and developing a more inclusive leadership pipeline within JRA.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

6.3.1 Leadership development and mentorship

The study recommends that JRA implement structured leadership development programmes specifically designed to support women in senior management positions. These initiatives should include mentorship, coaching, job shadowing, and leadership training opportunities designed to strengthen leadership competencies, professional confidence, and career progression among women employees. Formal mentorship programmes pairing experienced leaders with emerging women leaders may further support knowledge transfer, networking opportunities, and leadership readiness within the organisation.

6.3.2 Succession planning and career development

The findings highlight the need for JRA to strengthen succession planning processes to support the advancement and retention of women in senior management positions. Structured succession planning frameworks should identify high-potential female employees, support leadership preparation, and create clear career progression pathways.

In addition, the organisation should conduct regular skills audits and integrate career development initiatives into broader human resource planning processes to strengthen leadership continuity and talent retention.

6.3.3 Organisational culture and gender equity

JRA should strengthen the implementation of employment equity and diversity policies by promoting a more inclusive organisational culture. This may include regular diversity and inclusion training, leadership accountability mechanisms, and monitoring systems to improve policy implementation and workplace inclusivity.

The organisation should further promote access to development opportunities, professional networks, and leadership platforms to support gender equity within senior management structures.

6.3.4 Support structures and employee well-being

The study recommends that JRA strengthen organisational support structures for women in leadership positions. This may include initiatives that promote work-life balance, employee wellness, professional support networks, and flexible workplace arrangement where operationally possible. Strengthening support systems may improve employee satisfaction, leadership confidence, and long-term retention of women in senior management positions.

6.3.5 Monitoring and evaluation

JRA should establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of gender equity initiatives, leadership development programmes, and

succession planning processes. Regular evaluation may help the organisation identify implementation gaps, improve accountability, and support continuous organisational improvement.

6.4 INTEGRATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS WITH THE THEORETICAL MODEL

The findings of the study can be interpreted within the HCT framework, which underpinned the study. The results confirm that investment in skills development, mentorship, and leadership training plays an important role in advancing the careers of women in senior management positions at JRA. This aligns with HCT's assumption that the accumulation of skills, knowledge, and experience enhances individual capability and career advancement potential.

However, the findings also indicate that the effectiveness of human capital development is influenced by organisational and contextual factors, including workplace culture, access to leadership opportunities, and the availability of structured support systems. These factors may either enable or constrain the translation of human capital investments into actual progression.

Overall, the study reinforces the relevance of HCT while also highlighting that its effectiveness in practice depends on supportive organisational structures that facilitate equal access to development and advancement opportunities.

The study's findings are illustrated in Figure 6.1, which presents an integrated model alongside the study's theoretical underpinnings.

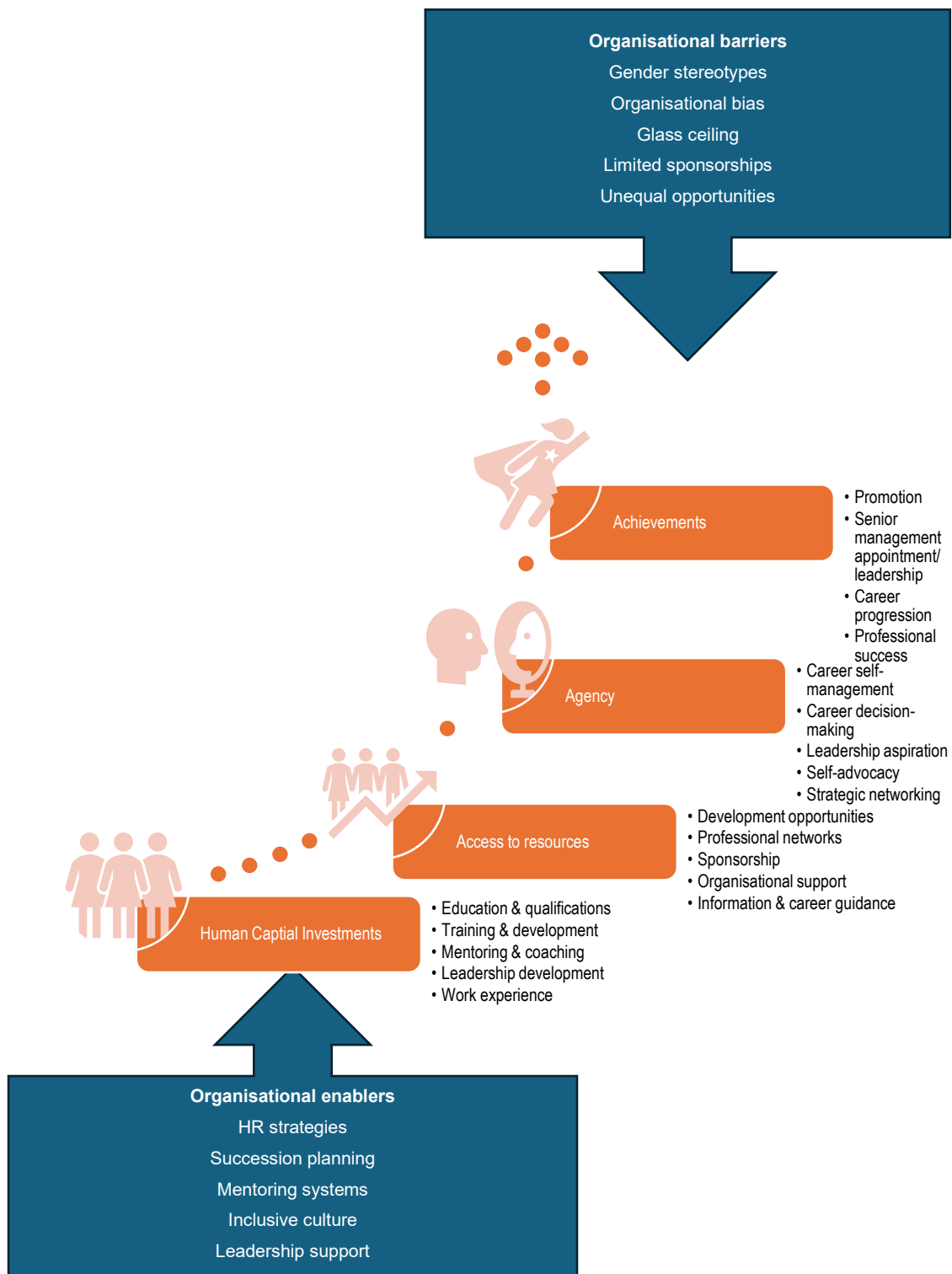


Figure 6.1 Integrated Human Capital–Empowerment Model for Women’s Career Advancement in Senior Management at the JRA

Source: Own construction

Figure 6.1 presents the integrated conceptual model emerging from the study. The model demonstrates that women’s career advancement is influenced by both Human

Capital Theory and Kabeer's Empowerment Framework. Human capital investments, including education, training, mentoring, leadership development, and work experience, provide the foundation for career advancement. However, these investments translate into advancement only when women have access to organisational resources such as networks, sponsorships, developmental opportunities, and organisational support. Access to these resources strengthens individual agency by enabling women to make strategic career decisions, pursue leadership opportunities, and influence career outcomes. Enhanced agency contributes to achievements such as promotion, leadership attainment, and career progression. The model further illustrates that organisational enablers and barriers influence each stage of the process, either facilitating or constraining women's advancement into senior management positions within the JRA.

6.5 MY ACADEMIC JOURNEY: A REFLECTION

The master's programme has been a transformative experience, contributing to my professional and personal development. Professionally, it enhanced critical and strategic thinking regarding organisational systems and strengthened understanding of how leadership and human resource practices can be used to support institutional change.

The research process also developed a greater appreciation of leadership as a practice grounded in responsibility, inclusion, and organisational development rather than authority alone. In addition, the process strengthened resilience and analytical depth in engaging with complex organisational and gender-related issues in the workplace.

Overall, the academic journey has contributed to a deeper understanding of workplace dynamics, gender equity, and organisational development, reinforcing the importance of evidence-based approaches to leadership and human capital development.

6.6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study examined the factors influencing the development and retention of women in senior management positions at JRA. The findings revealed that career development disparities, gender imbalances, limited structured growth pathways, and insufficient support systems continue to influence women's progression within the organisation. These challenges highlight the need for strengthened organisational commitment to gender equity through improved leadership development opportunities, structured succession planning and enhanced support mechanisms.

The study underscores the importance of integrating inclusive human resource practices, mentorship, and leadership development programmes to support women's advancement into senior roles. Addressing these factors may contribute to improved gender representation, organisational effectiveness, and a more equitable workplace environment.

Collectively, the study provides deeper insight into the structural and organisational factors that influence women's leadership progression within JRA and reinforces the importance of sustained efforts toward achieving gender equity in senior management.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS

GENERIC QUESTIONS:

1. In your experience, what is the management of the Johannesburg Roads Agency (JRA) doing to develop women??
2. What does the JRA do to retain women in senior management positions?
3. What are your thoughts on how women are represented in senior management in the JRA?
4. How do you see the organisation (JRA) supporting women in senior management?
5. What JRA policies are you aware of that aim to promote women to senior management positions?
6. What recommendations do you have for JRA with regard to the development and retention of women's representation in senior management positions?
7. What impact do social roles have on women in senior management positions?
8. In your viewpoint, what succession plans are there if any to aid in the integration of women into senior management positions?

FURTHER QUESTIONS:

9. What are your experiences of occupying a senior position as a woman?
10. How have you succeeded in reaching this position?
11. What challenges have you encountered in getting where you are?

APPENDIX B: LETTER OF ACCEPTANCE



a world class African city



City of Johannesburg
Johannesburg Roads Agency

75 Helen Joseph Street
Cnr. Harrison Street
Johannesburg
2001

P/Bag X70
Braamfontein
South Africa
2017

Tel +27(0) 11 298 5000
Fax +27(0) 11 298 5178
www.jra.org.za
www.joburg.org.za

Ms Sellwane Yona
Master in Business Management
University of South Africa

Dear Ms Yona

RE: REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT JRA

1. Your letter dated 19 August 2021 is acknowledged.
2. Your request to conduct research at the Johannesburg Roads Agency towards, **'Development and retaining women in senior management positions'** is granted subject to the following conditions:
 - 2.1 That you first submit to the JRA the questionnaire for the purposes of your research study to the Acting Head: Corporate Services for approval.
 - 2.2 That the topic of your research project will contribute to enhance the readiness of the JRA to prepare women for to occupy senior management positions.
 - 2.3 That you submit a copy of the research report to the JRA upon completion.
3. We are looking forward to the final product of your research results.
4. We hope that the information gathered during the research exercise will be treated with utmost confidentiality.

Yours Sincerely,



Republic Monakedi
Chief Executive Officer

Date: 09/09/2021

Chairman: Dr. A Mokoena
Executive Directors - Chief Executive Officer: S Monakedi, Chief Financial Officer: D Thindisa
Non-Executive Directors: L Mdluli, H Msimkhulu, F Ntsandeni, L Ndlovu, N Mla, T Seemela, T Tshitangano, Y Ngxabazi, S Chiloane-Nwabueze, E Mtshali, S Ralegoma
Company Secretary: P Majola

Registration No. 2000/028993/30

APPENDIX C: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT – CODER



CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

PROJECT TITLE: Development and retention of women in senior management positions: Johanneburg Roads Agency (JRA) in the City of Johannesburg

RESEARCHER NAME: Selwane Franscina Yona

This is to certify that I, **Mrs. Monique van der Walt**, the Research Project Consultant, agree to the responsibilities of assist in coding interviews and report on the research project (and additional tasks the researcher(s) may require in my capacity at **Liminal Research Consult (PTY)LTD** as an external coder.

I acknowledge that the research project is conducted by

Name of researcher: Selwane Franscina Yona

Name of supervisor: Melanie Bushney

Name of Co-Supervisor: Jennifer Roberts

Topic: Development and retention of women in senior management positions: Johanneburg Roads Agency (JRA) in the City of Johannesburg

Institution: UNISA

College: Business Management

I understand that any information (written, verbal, or any other form) obtained during the performance of my duties must remain confidential and in line with the University of South Africa's Policy, as a registered service provided. As I commence my duties, I understand that any information obtained in the course of my work must remain strictly confidential in accordance with the POPI Act and the institution's policy on Research Ethics.

This includes all information about participants, their employees/their employers/their organisation, as well as any other information.

Furthermore, I agree to:

- i. Keep all research information shared with me confidential and not disclose or share it with anyone other than the researcher(s).
- ii. Ensure that all research information in any form or format (e.g., documents, tapes, transcripts) is securely stored while in my possession.

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

- iii. Return all research information in any form or format to the researcher(s) upon completion of my research tasks.
- iv. Erase or destroy any research information in any form or format regarding this project that is not returnable to the researcher(s) after consulting with them.


I understand that any unauthorised release or carelessness in the handling of this confidential information will be considered a breach of the duty to maintain confidentiality.

I further understand that any breach of the duty to maintain confidentiality could be grounds for immediate dismissal and/or possible liability in any legal action arising from such breach.

Full Name of Research Consultant: **Monique van der Walt / Liminal Research Consult**

Signature of Research Consultant:  _____ Date: 08 September 2023

Full Name of Primary Researcher: **Selwane Franscina Yona**

Signature of Primary Researcher:  _____ Date: 08 September 2023

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to participate in the interviews as provided by the research.

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name of Researcher: Selwane Francina Yona

Signature of Researcher: _____ *sf yona* _____ Date: 27 May 2022



APPENDIX E: ETHICS APPROVAL



UNISA HRM ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 11 June 2022

Dear Ms Selwane Francina Yona

Decision: Approved

NHREC Registration #: (if applicable)

ERC Reference #: 2022_HRM_005

Name: Ms Selwane Francina Yona

Student #: 40732053

Researcher: Name: Ms Selwane Francina Yona
E-mail address, telephone # 40732053@mylife.unisa.ac.za, 083 555 7912

Supervisor: Name: Prof Melanie Jean Bushney
E-mail address, telephone # mbushney@unisa.ac.za, 012 429 3748

Co-supervisor: Name: Prof Jennifer Joyce Roberts
E-mail address, telephone # buckjj@unisa.ac.za, 012 337 6132

The working title of the research:

Development and retention of women in senior management positions: a case study at the Johannesburg Roads Agency

Qualification: MCom

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the Unisa HRM Ethics Review Committee for the abovementioned research. Ethics approval is granted for Selwane Francina Yona for a period of **three (3) years**.

*The **low-risk application** was **reviewed** by a Sub-committee of URERC on 19 May 2022 in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment. The ethics application was approved on 11 June 2022.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions:

- 1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid -19 position statement on research ethics attached.**

2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
3. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the HRM Committee.
4. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
5. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.
6. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines, and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
7. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in the future on the condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance
8. No fieldwork activities may continue after the expiry date of **June 2025**. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

*The reference number **2022_HRM_005** should be clearly indicated in all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Yours sincerely,


Signature

Name of the Chair: Dr Elizabeth Rudolph

E-mail: rudolec@unisa.ac.za

Tel: (012) 429 2586


Prof MC MULAUDZI (Jun 14, 2022 14:07 GMT+2)

Signature

Executive Dean: Prof MT Mogale

E-mail: mogalmt@unisa.ac.za

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APPENDIX F: EDITING CERTIFICATE

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APPENDIX G: TURNITIN REPORT

Similarity Report

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Summary