

**RETHINKING INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES: AN INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON
AFRICAN AND COLOURED WOMEN LEADERS IN SOUTH AFRICAN PRIVATE
SECTOR ORGANISATIONS**

by

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KEY TERMS DESCRIBING THE TITLE OF THE THESIS

TITLE:

RETHINKING INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES: AN INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON AFRICAN AND COLOURED WOMEN LEADERS IN SOUTH AFRICAN PRIVATE SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

KEY TERMS:

African women leaders, Coloured women leaders, Age, Diversity, Gender, Gender transformation, Inclusion, Intersectionality, Private sector, Race, Social capital, South Africa, Women in leadership.

ABSTRACT

Despite the growing number of women employed in South African private-sector organisations, the underrepresentation of African and Coloured women in senior and top leadership roles persists. Even with rigorous legislation intended to enable inclusive gender transformation, their proportionate representation in senior leadership roles remains elusive. This renders their voices absent in strategic practice and discourse. While extensive research exists on gender transformation in South African organisations, few studies employ the intersectional lens. As a result, current research fails to uncover the interconnected nature of personal and systemic factors that shape women leaders' experiences. This qualitative study was underpinned by interpretivism and employed narrative inquiry to examine the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders in South African private sector organisations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 African and Coloured women in middle, senior, and top leadership positions. Thematic and dialogic narrative analyses were employed for data analysis. The overall findings revealed that race, gender, age, and social capital did not intersect in isolation; instead, they were mutually constitutive with contextual factors, generating simultaneous experiences of privilege and subordination. The two groups of participants had common and divergent experiences of inequality within and across groups, as well as similar and discordant self and career narratives. Commonalities manifested through internalised inadequacies emanating from disadvantaged familial backgrounds; the near-absence of social networks; alienating workplace cultures; language and accent; and limited access to sponsorship and crucial information. Divergent narratives were evident in identity ambiguity, notions of preferred blacks, and differential proximity to whiteness by virtue of phenotypes and language. While transformation legislation was generally considered a positive factor, it was criticised by Coloured participants for its perceived biased focus on African women and relative neglect of Coloured women. The Intersectional Career Development Framework, developed from research data, is the study's main contribution. It closes the knowledge gap on the interlocking axes that constrain the progression of African and Coloured women leaders into strategic leadership levels. The framework provides policymakers, private sector leaders, human resources practitioners and aspiring women leaders with a deeper understanding of the interlocking personal and systemic barriers that stagnate the careers of African and Coloured women in middle-level leadership roles.

Keywords: African women leaders, Coloured women leaders, Age, Diversity, Gender, Gender transformation, Inclusion, Intersectionality, Private sector, Race, Social capital, South Africa, Women in leadership.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

BBBEE: Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
BCEA: Basic Conditions of Employment Act
BWASA: Business Women Association of South Africa
CEE: Commission for Employment Equity
CRT: Critical Race Theory
CRM: Civil Rights Movement
CRC: Combahee River Collective
DEL: Department of Employment and Labour
DTI: Department of Trade and Industry
EAP: Economically Active Population
EEA: Employment Equity Act
LGBTQ⁺: Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer
PEDUDA: Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act
STATS SA: Statistics South Africa
UN WOMEN: United Nations Women
WEP: World Economic Forum
WLM: Women's Liberation Movement
WOC: Women of Colour

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION

South African private sector organisations are expected to advance gender transformation at all levels of leadership. However, thirty-one years into the democratic era, this objective has not been fully realised (Barkhuizen, Masakale & Van der Sluis, 2022; Houston, Kanyane & Davids, 2022; Mbatha & Ruiters, 2025; Syster, Daya & April, 2023). The progression of both White and Indian women leaders into senior and top leadership roles has been impressive. At the same time, the career mobility of their African and Coloured counterparts flattens at middle management and falls short at senior and top leadership levels (CEE, 2024; Espi, Francis & Valodia, 2019; Gradin, 2021). It is vital for the entire workforce to feel that leadership is attainable to all talented people, regardless of identity markers (Hunt, Prince, Dixon-Fyle & Dolan, 2020; Luiz & Terziev, 2024).

Attempts to improve workplace experiences for racial and ethnic groups, as well as for women, can be traced back to the United States' efforts to promote equality (Anand & Winters, 2008; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Smith & Nkomo, 2021). Over time, diversity has been embraced by global companies and governments, thereby transcending national boundaries. This includes South Africa. Diversity, however, is ineffective in ensuring gender transformation (Dennissen, Benschop & van den Brink, 2020; Leslie, 2019; Nkomo, 2021; Nkomo, Bell, Roberts, Joshi & Thatcher, 2019). Inclusion emerged as an alternative to complement diversity in the pursuit of gender transformation (Bourke & Dillon, 2018; Frost & Kalman, 2016; Shapiro, 2022; Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Holcombe, Ehrhart, & Singh, 2011).

A system that includes everyone, irrespective of privilege or disadvantage, often fails to acknowledge gender inequality and related patterns (Dennissen et al., 2020; Leslie, 2019; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Tyler, 2019). Despite good intentions, diversity and inclusion have also failed to address endemic inequalities (Adamson, Kelan, Lewis, Sliwa & Rumens, 2021; Dobusch, 2014). Diversity programmes in the private sector tend to focus on the economic benefits of appointing women in leadership and accessing the untapped black consumer market segment (Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo & Michel, 2018; Steinfield et al., 2019; Terblanche, Steenkamp, Dippenaar & Soobaroyen, 2025; Wooten, 2019), thus detracting attention away from the fact that it was borne of the histories of struggle to remedy social inequities (Ahmed, 2007; Naidoo, Mthombeni & Chiba, 2024; Steinfield, Sanghvi, Zayer, Coleman & Ourahmourné, 2019). An ideology that includes everyone, regardless of historical privilege or disadvantage, fails to acknowledge the existence of gender inequality and patterns of bias (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). Diversity and inclusion shift attention away from addressing race and

gender disparities, reducing these to concepts such as personality factors, culture, language, diversity of thought, hobbies, and many other characteristics (Dennissen et al., 2020; Nkomo, 2021; Nkomo et al., 2019; Steinfield et al., 2019).

1.2 THEORETICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

A significant amount of research on gender transformation has been conducted over the decades, both locally and globally, yet it has focused on singular explanations that examine one aspect at a time (Ahmed, 2007; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Dlamini, 2013; Leslie, 2019; Nkomo et al., 2019; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop & Nkomo, 2010). Diversity programmes have treated race as a surface-level category of difference alongside other managerial, organisational, and study-unit categories, yet race pervades all aspects of organisational culture and norms (Nkomo, 2021; Tripp, 2023). While diversity and inclusion provide valuable insights into the theorisation of difference and belonging, neither accounts for the influence of intersecting identities nor recognises multi-level contexts (Adesina, Joham, Hamad, Pincha-Baduge, & Garth, 2025). The former examines one category at a time (Atewologun, 2018; Dennissen et al., 2020; Steinfield et al., 2019), while the latter still requires further development (Shapiro, 2021; Shore & Chung, 2024). Some intersectionality leadership studies in South Africa tend to dilute the essence of intersectionality by including all groups of women, even those who are overrepresented in leadership positions, thereby deviating from what it was meant to accomplish, which is foregrounding the voices of those who are multiply marginalised (Collins, 1990; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 2018; Dlamini, 2013; McKinzie & Richards, 2019; Tripp, 2023).

Intersectionality addresses the shortcomings of diversity and inclusion by confronting persistent patterns of inequality (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 2018; Hankivsky, 2022; Shields, 2008). It is not additive; instead, it has devolved gender and integrated it with race and other interlocking identity categories that reproduce privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Mercer, Paludi, Mills & Mills, 2015; Ruiz, Luebke, Klein, Moore & Gonzales et al., 2021). McKinzie and Richards (2019) propose ways to strengthen the relevance of an intersectional lens in organisations. They suggest that intersectionality enables the inquirer to recognise that individuals, institutions, and social structures are interconnected, and that both power and subordination are simultaneously discernible (Ruiz et al., 2021).

Most intersectional leadership studies have been conducted in the Global North, thus overlooking the particularities of the South African context (Dlamini, 2013; Lewis, 2017; Mestry & Schmidt, 2014; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). There are South African studies that have applied intersectionality in various spheres of life, some of which include education (Mestry & Schmidt, 2014;

Moodley, 2025; Moorosi, Fuller & Reilley, 2018; Soudien, 2008, 2024); religion (Diko, 2023; Mothoagae & Machandu–Mudzusi, 2021); organisations; the public and private domains combined (Forbay, 2025; Hunter & Hachini, 2012; Jaga, Arabandi, Bagraim & Mdlongwa, 2018; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022; Parashan, 2014); and society (Bob, 2012; Humphrey, 2016; Phaswana, 2021). There is, however, a paucity of literature using intersectionality in business leadership studies in South Africa (Bosch & Booysen, 2021; Carrim, 2021; Dlamini, 2013; Forbay, 2025; Lewis, 2017; Ncube, 2018).

Studies undertaken in South African private-sector organisations have primarily examined the intersection of race and gender (Lewis, 2017; Phaswana, 2021) or the intersection of race, gender, and social class (Dlamini, 2013; Forbay, 2025; Ncube, 2018; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022). Studies undertaken in South African private- sector organisations have primarily examined the intersection of race and gender (Lewis, 2017; Phaswana, 2021) or the intersection of race, gender, and social class (Dlamini, 2013; Forbay, 2025; Ncube, 2018; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022). Only one study that considered culture could be located (Carrim, 2021. Jaga et al. (2018) examined the impact of organisational culture on work-life in professional occupations. Some studies examined language, sexuality, and place separately (Hunter & Hachimi, 2012; Luiz & Terziev, 2024; Parashar, 2014). On the methodological front, existing intersectional studies employed grounded theory, constructive grounded theory, case study research, phenomenology, and secondary data analysis (Carrim, 2021; Dlamini, 2013; Forbay, 2025; Hunter & Lewis, 2017; Luiz & Terziev, 2024; Mbatha, 2025; Ncube, 2018). This study employed narrative inquiry as a research strategy.

The categories of analysis in this study were gender, race, age, and social capital. While the presence or insufficiency of the first three identity markers is relatively salient, social capital is not detectable (Alcoff, 2006; Keller, 2025). The choice of race and gender was informed by the fact that they are core areas of focus of the Employment Equity Act (EEA) of 1998. However, age is seldom explored in intersectionality studies (Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019). When included, it is often presented as a mere footnote (Tshenyego, 2023). While Dlamini (2013) did not address age in her study, she highlighted its importance by calling for future studies to include an intergenerational mix. Social capital is also overlooked in current intersectional leadership studies in South Africa.

1.3 EMPIRICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Racial segregation of Black, Coloured and White people in South Africa took effect from 1652 and intensified during apartheid in 1948, until the first democratic elections in 1994. In his seminal book, Terreblanche (2002) notes that the racial and gender discriminatory practices in the South African private sector between 1970 and 1995 led to stark poverty levels within specific population groups.

Women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities bore the brunt of such discrimination. African women had the highest unemployment rate and the lowest pay (Casale et al., 2021; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022; Styer, Daya & April, 2023), followed, to a lesser extent, by Coloured women (Espino et al., 2019; Francis & Valodia, 2019; Gradin, 2021; Leibbrandt, Woolard, Finn & Argent, 2010; Phaswana, 2021). The above reports demonstrate employer preferences in hiring, advancement, and workforce reduction.

1.3.1 Population groups in South Africa

The history of race relations in South African workplaces is steeped in the apartheid divide-and-rule practice, which normalised racialisation of South African society and organisations. Posel (2001) asserts that, in South Africa, socio-economic and political structures were race-based and linked to social class. Following the promulgation of the Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950, people of European descent were highly regarded, Coloured people were in the middle, and indigenous Black (Bantu) people were at the bottom (Casale et al., 2021; Pirtle, 2023; Terreblanche, 2014). Determinants of racial categories were socially and politically formed, based on appearance, hair texture, skin shade, descent, opinion of social class, ability to speak either English or Afrikaans, and other arbitrary categories (Forbay, 2025; Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2021; Posel, 2001; Tewolde, 2024). The first Indian community arrived in South Africa in 1860; a tenth came as merchants, while the rest were indentured labourers for fixed periods and repatriated to India until 1911 (Desai, 2010; Pillay, 2018; Ramsamy, 1996). After 1910, they were incorporated as a race group alongside the three groups up to 1948, known as Indian or Asian (Ellsion & de Wet, 2020; Pillay, 2018; Pirtle, 2023; Ramsay, 1996).

The use of discretionary judgment, including the arbitrary hair-pencil test, led to the reclassification of people who passed as European, Coloured, or native African. Hair texture in South African politics was used as an instrument of oppression and othering, especially in determining whether a person was Coloured, White, or Black (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2022; Stone & Erasmus, 2012). The pencil would be inserted into people's hair; if it slipped in easily or fell out, the person was classified as White (Power, 2009; Tewolde, 2024). Bailey (1998) and Du Bois and Marable (2015) insist that the power of racial classification is located with the group that accords who is White and who is "non-White". Juxtaposed with this assertion is the idea that, where identity is imposed, people see themselves through the lens of markers imposed by those in power. In South Africa, this means the nationalist government, which was the architect of apartheid (Du Bois & Marable, 2015; Manganyi, 2018; Tewolde, 2024).

Racial hierarchies determined privileges and oppression for some individuals based on their perceived superior and inferior racial status (Casale et al., 2021; Jaga et al., 2018; Pirtle, 2023; Salter,

Adams & Perez, 2018). Proximity to White upper-class lifestyles determined one's status and subsequent acceptance in the purportedly superior race (Hesse-Biber & Barko, 2008; Houston et al., 2022). The Population Registration Act of 1950, which was repealed in 1991, formalised racial categories into law and required all citizens to have identity documents that confirmed the "purity" of their race, either White, Indian, Coloured or Black, thus legitimising and entrenching racial discrimination (Erasmus, 2001; Forbay, 2025).

1.3.2 The legislative and institutional context

Governments have a responsibility to protect women's rights in the workplace through legislation (UN Women, 2025). In a quest to eradicate apartheid-era inequalities and unfair practices in South African workplaces, the post-1994 government enacted new legislative measures to redress inequalities and achieve employment equity (CEE, 2024; DEL, 2023). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa is hailed as progressive and exemplary among democratic countries; it took effect on 4 February 1997. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Discrimination (PEDUDA) Act No. 4 of 2000 is also subsumed under the Constitution. The PEDUDA interdicts discrimination and harassment based on race, gender, age, and disability, and has provisions to support and protect previously disadvantaged people.

To enact the Constitution regarding the employer-employee environment, the Employment Equity Act (EEA) No. 55 of 1998 was passed as one of the labour laws; it aimed to transform workplaces by applying the economically active population (EAP) of the available workforce as a baseline from which to set employment equity (EE) targets for designated employers (DEL, 2023). The EAP serves as a yardstick for representing country demographics across all occupational levels to address past racial, gender and disability imbalances (Stone & Erasmus, 2012). The enactment of the EEA marked a significant transition in the South African private sector, aimed at eliminating disparities and promoting inclusive economic participation (DEL, 2023). The EEA utilises affirmative action (AA) measures to address historical imbalances in employment practices affecting designated groups and to ensure equitable representation (CEE, 2022; 2023, 2024, 2025). In terms of the EEA, designated groups are previously disadvantaged women, people living with disabilities and black people who comprise African, Coloured, Indian and later Chinese people, who are South African citizens either by birth or descent or through naturalisation before 1994, while White remained the same (DTI, 2022). In practice, and in this study, African people identify more with the construct Black; their counterparts also refer to them in the same way.

The Department of Employment and Labour sets sectoral targets for each occupational category relative to South Africa's economically active population (EAP) as a measure of progress or lack thereof. The EEA defines designated employers as those with fifty (50) or more employees. The EAP comprises individuals who are employed, unemployed, or actively seeking employment between the ages of fifteen (n = 15) and sixty-five (n = 65) years (DEL, 2023). Annually, EE reports are submitted to the Department of Employment and Labour for appraisal under the EEA, Section 28 of the EEA.

Furthermore, the South African government sought to strengthen economic empowerment and business ownership among designated groups by enacting the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act 53 of 2003 (DTI, 2022). The attainment of BBBEE is measured against a set of codes, each with assigned scores, including ownership, skills development, management control, enterprise and supplier development, and socio-economic development (Reddy & Mncwango, 2021). The EEA is operationalised in the management control element of BBBEE (CEE, 2023). The BBBEE data are insufficient to address the study's research aim, as their scope extends beyond employer-employee workplace relations and experiences, albeit by excluding White women from the definition of previously disadvantaged. The EEA was more applicable to this study, as it provided rich data insights to answer the research questions. The EEA is discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section.

To achieve transformation in South African organisations, several institutions with specific mandates were established. In 1996, the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) was established as an independent body to promote and protect gender equality in South Africa through research, public education and effective monitoring and litigation (CGE, 2021). In 2013, the CGE was amended to align with the Constitution of South Africa. The essence of the CGE is to promote social and economic empowerment for women and to nurture, develop and protect children. Several gender transformation initiatives have been launched since then; however, their enforcement of gender equality has been lacking in both the public and private sectors (CGE, 2023).

In May 1999, a statutory body, the Commission for Employment Equity (CEE), was established to advise the Minister of Employment and Labour on matters concerning the EEA, as outlined in the Code of Good Practice (DEI, 2023). The CEE report consolidates all EEA reports submitted annually to assess the EEA's status and the progress of designated employers across all sectors against the strategic objectives set by the CEE at the start of each year. In this study, the CEE report covering the period from April 1, 2019, to March 31, 2025, was used to assess the implementation of the EEA.

Producing employer EE reports should shift from a focus on avoiding fines to emphasising the spirit of the law (CEE, 2023; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). According to Dlamini (2022) and Matotoka

and Odeku (2021), employment equity is not only an ethical endeavour but also a principle of social justice to undo the effects of racism and discrimination meted out against black people, women, and people living with disabilities. Moreover, the EEA aims to dismantle barriers that prevent women from accessing roles traditionally reserved for men (Dlamini, 2022; Mayiya, Schachtebeck & Diniso, 2019). The following section provides a global perspective on gender representation across all levels of leadership, followed by a local perspective.

1.3.3 Global representation of women in leadership

“Gender equality remains the unfinished business of our time, and the private sector is indispensable in closing the gap” (UN Women, 2025).

Global gender transformation in society, politics and the workplace has been a topic of discussion for several decades; however, progress has been slow (Devillard et al., 2018; Earthy & Carli, 2018). Women in senior leadership roles remain sparse, despite extensive gender equality awareness programmes and policies in developed and developing countries (Dilli, 2025; Perron, Karlson & Kon, 2023; UN Women, 2025). According to the 19th World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Gender Gap Index report of 2025, the gender gap stood at 68.8% across 148 economies, down from 68.4% the previous year. This means that it will take 123 years to reach gender parity. Among the four indices measured, economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment remain the lowest, ranking third and fourth at 61% and 22.9%, respectively. Women held only 30% of managerial positions in 2025 (UN Women, 2025). Women leaders’ under-representation in the labour market is one of the sources of inequality between men and women. South Africa ranks 98th in economic participation and 21st in political empowerment among 148 countries (World Economic Forum, 2025). This indicates that South African private sector companies lag the public sector in gender representation. A global study on representation of race and gender in the private sector talent pipeline, from the lowest to the highest occupational level, confirms that top leadership consists of White men (WM) followed by White women (WW) and Men of Colour (MOC), while Women of Colour (WOC) are at the bottom leadership rungs across all occupational categories (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

According to the South African Quarterly Labour Survey, as at the end of August 2025, 34% of people employed in the South African private sector are aged below thirty-five, while the remaining 66% are older (Stats SA, 2025). The ratio is skewed towards older people, exposing workplaces to increased intergenerational competition for opportunities for upward mobility (World Health Organisation, 2020). In South Africa, all but the Black African population group is aging, with women slightly higher in number than men (Stats SA, 2025).

1.3.4 The efficacy of the Employment Equity Act

The following sections outline four segments representing the gender demographics of primarily women and one segment representing men in leadership positions in South African private sector organisations, based on the 19th to 25th CEE annual reports, along with a summary of the years under review and the respective EAP proportions (CEE, 2023, 2024). The data series covers the period from the 1st of April 2019 to the 31st of March 2025. The overall gender representation measured against the EAP, for the period under review, is presented in Table 1.1, titled "South African private sector leadership demographics 2019–2025" below.

Table 1.1: South African private sector leadership demographics 2019–2025

Years	African (AM)	Coloured (CM)	Indian (IM)	White (WM)	African (AW)	Coloured (CW)	Indian (IW)	White (WW)
EAP	43.5%	4,6%	1,7%	4,1%	37,5%	4.2%	1.%	3,4%
Top Leadership								
2019	7,8%	3,3%	7,4%	55,4%	4,2%	2,1%	3,2%	13,2%
2020	8,1%	3,4%	7,5%	54,6%	4,6%	2,1%	3,4%	13,2%
2021	8,7%	3,3%	7,7%	53,1%	5,2%	2,2%	3,6%	13,1%
2022	8,4%	3,4%	7,8%	52,6%	5,4%	2,4%	3,8%	13,2%
2023	8,5%	3,5%	8,0%	51,8%	5,5%	2,4%	4,0%	13,3%
2024	8,9%	3,4%	8,2%	51,0%	5,7%	2,5%	4,1%	13,4%
Senior Leadership								
2019	10,9%	4,8%	7,9%	39,9%	6,3%	3,3%	4,3%	19,2%
2020	11,3%	4,8%	8,0%	39,0%	6,7%	3,3%	4,5%	19,0%
2021	11,9%	4,7%	8,2%	37,9%	7,2%	3,3%	4,7%	18,8%
2022	12,2%	4,8%	8,3%	36,5%	7,8%	3,5%	5,0%	18,6%
2023	12,6%	5,0%	8,3%	35,4%	8,4%	3,7%	5,1%	18,3%
2024	13,4%	5,0%	8,1%	34,0%	8,9%	3,8%	5,1%	18,3%
Middle Management								
2019	17,7%	5,8%	6,4%	26,8%	12,8%	5,0%	4,8%	17,7%
2020	18,0%	5,9%	6,6%	26,0%	13,4%	5,1%	5,0%	17,2%
2021	18,4%	5,9%	6,6%	25,5%	14,1%	5,0%	5,2%	16,6%
2022	19,3%	5,9%	6,6%	23,8%	15,5%	5,2%	5,2%	15,8%
2023	20,0%	6,0%	6,5%	23,2%	15,4%	5,3%	5,1%	15,7%
2024	20,0%	6,0%	6,4%	22,0%	16,6%	5,4%	5,1%	15,1%
EAP	Exceed	Neutral	Below					

Sources: Adapted from Commission for Employment Equity Report, 2023, 2024)

It is important to understand the status of women in leadership roles in South African private sector organisations to determine the best way to advance African and Coloured women leaders to fill talent pipelines. The six-year trend in Table 1.1 above indicates that designated employers pay lip service to EEA. The overall picture confirms a preference for White men, and among the designated groups, White women (WW), Indian men (IM), and Indian women (IW), in that order. The White and Indian groups far exceed their EAP proportions across all three levels of leadership. There is a significant underrepresentation of African men (AM) and African women (AW) across all leadership occupational categories during the period under review. Still, the African group collectively comprise 81% of the available leadership pool in the country. There is an underrepresentation of Coloured men (CM) in top leadership, and they are just beginning to meet their EAP levels in senior leadership. Representation of coloured women is lacking at senior and top management levels. Coloured women meet and exceed their EAP proportion in the middle management layer. There appears to be no commitment to include African men and women, and, to a lesser extent, Coloured women in leadership positions in South African private sector organisations. This trend resembles the apartheid-era racial and gender preferences (Casale et al., 2021; Gradin, 2019; Pirtle, 2023). The following sections focus solely on women leaders at the occupational levels represented in Table 1.1.

African women's overall EAP is 37.6%, followed by Coloured women at 4.2%, Indian women at 1.0%, and White women at 3.4%. The lowest EAP is among Indian women at 1%. Although African women constitute a significant percentage of the talent pool from which leadership positions are selected, their representation in middle, senior, and top leadership roles does not reflect this. The rest of the women leaders meet or exceed their respective proportions in middle management: 5.1% for Coloured women, 4.9% for Indian women, and 13.2% for White women. Based on the above, both Indian and White women leaders have largely benefited from affirmative action across all levels over the years under review. The private sector should address the underrepresentation of African and Coloured women within the leadership cohort.

The private sector evidently has misgivings about transformation, and the equity reports submitted do not show substantive change that recognises and seeks to address inequity (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Forbay, 2025; CEE, 2023; Lewis, 2017). Despite excellent EE legislation in South Africa, inequalities are perpetuated through biased workplace policies and practices (Dlamini, 2022; Forbay, 2025; Luiz & Terziev, 2024; Ncube, 2018; Ndida & Okeke-Uzodike, 2012; Ronni, 2020). The underrepresentation of African women in middle, senior, and top leadership positions, as well as Coloured women in senior and top leadership positions, does not bode well for gender transformation. Middle management roles serve as a leadership bench for succession into strategic decision-making

roles and are aspirational for junior management and/or first-line leadership roles (Daft, 2015; Devillard, Hunt & Yee, 2018; Goryunova, Townsend, Scribner & Madsen, 2024). Senior leadership is crucial for providing input to top leadership and translating company strategy into operational plans (Daft, 2015; McShane & von Glinow, 2011; Goryunova et al., 2024).

In this study, only African and Coloured women leaders were selected as cases for investigation. This is despite the scarcity of African men in leadership roles and the underrepresentation of Coloured men in top positions. The former's overall average across all levels is 13,1%, against an aspirational goal of 43,5%, while the latter group, which is on average 3.38% against an EAP of 4,6% in top leadership, exceeds their EAP proportion by 0.25% in senior leadership. Empirical evidence indicates that the historical beginnings of African and Coloured women's representation in the private sector are similar (Casale et al., 2021; Terreblanche, 2002) and that this pattern persists (CEE, 2023; Espi et al., 2019; Forbay & Mnguni, 2025). Impediments to the advancement of African and Coloured women leadership are not limited to their numerical count, but include structural barriers stemming from deficient self-image, organisational policies, workplace norms and societal attitudes (Blommaert, Meuleman, Leenheer & Butkevica, 2020; Cerruti, Baloyi & Shabangu, 2020; Dlamini, 2022; Forbay, 2025; Ndida & Okeke-Uzodike, 2012; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022). Structural barriers exclude women leaders as a group in top decision-making functions (Syster et al., 2023). Legislatively speaking, both White and Indian women are, as a function of gender, included in the group of previously disadvantaged South Africans, and Indian women are also classified as black. The two groups, however, are excluded from the current study because their progression has been so rapid that they now exceed their EAP proportions.

By foregrounding the voices of African and Coloured women leadership, new modes of thinking could expose previously masked repressive practices and the subsequent remedies, which could even be applied to AM and CM. Leijen, Arcidiacono and Baucal (2021) argue that excluding incumbents from a study should take precedence over the desire to be inclusive at all costs. The focus on African and Coloured women leaders is justified, as their need for redress and restoration is more urgent than that of other underrepresented groups.

Summing up the CEE report of 2024/2025, top leadership in South African private sector organisations during this period was as follows: Leaders from the White and Indian population groups were twelve ($n = 12$) and eight ($n = 8$) times more than their EAP proportions, while those from the African and Coloured population groups were 18% and 6,2% below their EAP proportions, respectively. Opportunities for promotion and recruitment in both senior and top leadership functions accrued to the

White and Indian groups (CEE, 2024). Decision-making dominance lies with the White group, followed by the Indian group. Within the women's groups, both White and Indian women are preferred managers, while the African and Coloured women's talent pipelines are blocked from the feeder levels of their respective groups. It seems that the voices of the African and Coloured women are muzzled in the private sector: 90% of the private sector reports submitted for the current CEE cycle expressly stated that “there were no barriers to employee transfers, promotions from junior and all the way to top management levels” (CEE, 2022:8). This assertion raises the question: If the key levers to advance all the disadvantaged groups are unfettered, what are the obstructions? In the next section, the rationale for undertaking this study is clarified by identifying knowledge and practice gaps within the study's background and the empirical context of gender studies.

1.4 KNOWLEDGE GAP

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) studies examine a single social identity at a time and fail to account for the complex ways in which multiple social identities intersect to shape women leaders' lived experiences (Adamson et al., 2021; Dennissen et al., 2020; Leslie, 2019; Nkomo et al., 2019). While intersectionality research exists in the South African private sector and across the broader African continent, there is a scarcity of literature that uses intersectionality as a theoretical lens in women-in-leadership studies in South Africa (Bosch & Booysen, 2021; Dlamini, 2013; Forbay, 2025; Ncube, 2018). There is a need for more local intersectional leadership studies, as research from the USA and Europe cannot adequately address local nuances (Dlamini, 2013; Forbay, 2025; Lewis, 2017). Furthermore, while most South African studies include race, gender, and social class (Dlamini, 2013; Forbay, 2025; Ncube, 2018; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022), age is often overlooked (Dlamini, 2013). Studies that consider age as an identity marker in South African private sector organisations are scarce (Makiwane, Ndida & Botsis, 2012). Current intersectional studies often overlook social capital, despite its significant role in facilitating career advancement (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Barkhuizen et al., 2022; D'Este et al., 2025; Rigolini & Huse, 2021).

1.5 PRACTICE GAP

Discriminatory practices are less pronounced than in the pre-1994 era. Most of the chief executives surveyed in a local study listed diversity and inclusion as key focus areas (Bourke & Dillon, 2018). However, only a third (33%) had strategies in place to implement employment equity, particularly regarding race and gender transformation across leadership levels, as measured by EAP proportions. African women leaders and, to a lesser extent, Coloured women, face significant barriers to career progression relative to their representation in the EAPs. It is important not to aggregate all

women into a single, colour-blind category, as this erases noteworthy differences in the circumstances experienced by African and Coloured women leaders. It is evident that preferential treatment in levelling the playing fields followed the pre-1994 racial and gender hierarchy, with a “concrete ceiling” for African women leaders (Casale et al., 2021; Mayiya, Schachtebeck & Diniso, 2019; Phaswana, 2021) and Coloured women leaders in South African private sector organisations (Forbay, 2025). Until January 2025, the Department of Employment and Labour left the decision of setting EE targets to the private sector. It then announced coercive measures against companies that paid lip service to employment equity in March 2025 (DEL, 2025).

1.6 PROBLEM STATEMENT

“If one misdiagnoses a problem, then one is unlikely to prescribe an effective cure” (Earthy & Carli, 2018: 147). Despite a growing number of women employed in South African private sector organisations, African women and Coloured women are underrepresented in middle, senior, and top leadership positions. Diversity and inclusion programmes have been unsuccessful in addressing persistent disparities in the private sector. Consequently, a large majority of the previously disadvantaged groups, including African and Coloured women leaders, remain marginalised. Studies investigating gender transformation in South African private sector organisations are abundant, yet those that utilise intersectionality as a lens are limited. There is an infrequency of scholarly research on how women's multiple identity categories are conceptualised and constituted in multi-layered contexts within South African corporations.

This study employed an intersectional lens to investigate the lived experiences of women leaders in South African private sector organisations. It aimed to understand the causes of plateauing in middle management and the concomitant underrepresentation in senior and executive leadership roles. The interpretivist research paradigm underpinned this study, utilising narrative inquiry to examine how the intersection of gender, race, age, and social capital influenced the advancement of middle managers into senior and executive leadership functions. Data were collected from 12 women in middle, senior, and top leadership roles in the Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces of South Africa.

1.7 RESEARCH AIM

This study investigates the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders, their reasons for plateauing in middle management, and their underrepresentation in both senior and top leadership positions within South African private-sector organisations.

1.8 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main research objectives and sub-research objectives are outlined in the next sub-sections

1.8.1 Main objective

The main objective of the study was to examine the extent to which race, gender, age, and social capital simultaneously affect the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders within South African private-sector organisations.

Sub-research objectives

The sub-research objectives (SO) of the study were to:

- SO1) Investigate the extent to which personal factors facilitate or hinder African and Coloured women leaders' access to senior and executive leadership roles in the South African private sector.
- SO2) Examine the impact of organisational factors on African and Coloured women leaders' lived experiences within South African private sector organisations.
- SO3) Explore the extent to which broader socio-historical and legal factors enable or hinder African and Coloured women leaders' access to senior and executive levels within South African private sector organisations.
- SO4) Identify strategies to advance inclusive gender transformation within South African private sector organisations
- SO5) Develop an intersectional framework for inclusive gender transformation within South African private sector organisations.

1.9 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question and aligned sub-research questions are listed in the next sub-sections

1.9.1 Main research question

To what extent do race, gender, age, and social capital simultaneously affect African and Coloured women leaders' lived experiences within South African private-sector organisations?

The sub-research questions (SQ) were:

- SQ1) How do personal factors facilitate or hinder African and Coloured women leaders' access to senior and executive leadership roles in the South African private sector?
- SQ2) In what ways do organisational factors impact African and Coloured women leaders' lived experiences within South African private sector organisations?

SQ3) To what extent do socio-historical and legal factors enable or hinder African and Coloured women leaders from reaching senior and top leadership levels within the South African private sector?

SQ4) What strategies should be put in place to advance inclusive gender transformation in South African organisations?

1.10 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is important and timely for several reasons. The paucity of African and Coloured women in key decision-making roles means that they are often spoken for and their voices are thus absent from strategic leadership. The importance of this study lies in the revelation of various forms of oppression that African and Coloured women leaders encounter daily in the workplace. Recognising African and Coloured women leaders in the workplace would create a reflective talent pool and enable this group to realise its full potential. By extension, young talent drawn from similar backgrounds would have role models to emulate. The dismantling of disadvantages exacerbated by the “isms,” such as racism, sexism, ageism and elitism, can lead to social cohesion and truly inclusive workplaces.

Top decision-makers could gain insights into the workplace experiences of African and Coloured women leaders, as told through their own voices, to address the inequalities that keep them at the margins. Upcoming talent and existing women leaders might gain a roadmap for navigating their career pathways, along with strategies to overcome obstacles and thrive. This study could allow women leaders experiencing situations similar to those of the African and Coloured women cohort to share their leadership journeys.

The study aimed to reveal how entrenched socio-historical and legal modes of power and oppression manifest in company practices and policies, and to examine the links between these factors and their impact on African and Coloured women leaders. Top leadership and human resources professionals could be enabled to review and eliminate sources of bias and remnants of institutional discrimination in SA organisations. The study could reveal obstacles that have eluded policymakers in their understanding of the factors at play, adding to the body of knowledge and practices within the Department of Employment and Labour. This inquiry contributes to the development of a conceptual framework in women's studies.

1.11 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study involved African and Coloured women leaders in middle, senior, and top leadership positions within private-sector organisations. Participants were drawn from two provinces of South Africa, namely, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. Neither African nor Coloured men were included in this

study, for reasons explained in Section 1.2: Application of the Employment Equity Act. The targeting of African and Coloured women was informed by their invisibility in senior and executive leadership roles within South African private sector organisations, as reflected in the CEE reports (CEE, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023; 2024), while neither White nor Indian women leaders experienced marginalisation in terms of career mobility during this period.

1.12 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

In the main, the study was anchored in four social identity categories: race, gender, age, and social capital. The key concepts used in the study are defined below.

Age can be described as chronological, personal, social, and functional (Kastenbaum, Derbin, Sabatini & Artt, 1972). In this study, chronological age—the length of time a person has lived—was used. The country's employment age range is 15 to 18 years, provided that this cohort undertakes age-appropriate work (CEE, 2023). In South African workplaces, it is illegal to discriminate against others on the grounds of age, that is “ageism” (DEL, 2023). Age is not a fixed concept; it is dynamic, and this study therefore embraced its fluidity. In South Africa, youth are defined as those aged 14 to 35 (NYP SA, 2020). People may retire between the ages of 55 and 65 years (www.gov.za). The study participants' target age ranged from 30 to 65 years. Seasoned, experienced middle leadership roles typically involve individuals who are 29 years or older and have worked for about 6 years in first-line leadership or skilled individual contributor roles. Under local labour legislation, the retirement age is 65, and most companies apply it. Age is not a fixed concept; it is dynamic. This study embraces the fluidity of age.

Apartheid was an oppressive system preceded by colonialism and established in 1948. It was built on white supremacist foundations in South Africa, reinforced by beliefs and theories of racial classification that contradicted verified methods of science (Pirtle, 2023; Posel, 2001; Stone & Erasmus, 2012; Terreblanche, 2002). Social class was tied to race, and White people were followed by Indian, Coloured, and finally Black Africans at the bottom (Casale et al., 2021; Gradin, 2021; Terreblanche, 2002, 2014).

Diversity is about similarities and differences, whether visible or invisible (Shapiro, 2022). Visible diversity is a person's physical DNA, features, complexion, hair texture, race, and ethnicity, while invisible diversity includes, but is not limited to, life experiences, thinking, education, beliefs, workstyles, hierarchy, and preferences (Bourke, 2018). Diversity theory is grouped among theories of difference (Atewologun, 2018). Diversity and inclusion were key considerations in this study's pursuit of gender transformation.

The Employment Equity Act (EEA) provides for the implementation of affirmative action to redress past discriminatory practices in South African workplaces (DEL, 2023, 2025). The EEA aims to address socio-historical employment disparities in advancement and income levels, while also providing reasonable accommodations, thereby promoting access to opportunities for Black groups, women, and people with disabilities (CEE, 2023). Employers are encouraged to strive to reflect SA's economically active population (EAP) when determining equitable numerical targets (CEE, 2024).

Gender refers to social attributes associated with being male or female; this definition is binary and essentialist (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Bendl, 2009; Calas & Smircich, 1989). Relationships between opposite sexes are socially constructed and internalised through socialisation processes (UN WOMEN, 2025). Gender roles are assigned to women and men by society and are embedded in culture and traditions (Jun, 2024; Stats SA, 2024). Non-binary gender identities are recognised, including among LGBTQ+ individuals who identify as neither male nor female (Luiz & Terziev, 2024; Reygan, Henderson & Khan, 2022). In this study, the binary definition of gender (man) (male) or woman (female) was applied in alignment with the Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) report and the Employment Equity Act (EEA). All participants identified as cisgender females (women).

Gender transformation entails removing societal barriers to addressing the root causes of power imbalances and gender inequalities affecting women and girls in homes, communities, institutions of learning, workplaces, and other spheres of life. This process creates an enabling environment by empowering those affected through programmes, legislation, and educational initiatives (UN Women, 2025).

Inclusion concerns interpersonal experiences in the workplace, where people feel they belong and are valued, and where workplace policies and practices are applied equitably, regardless of identity markers (Frost & Kalman, 2016; Shapiro, 2022). Inclusion is a new concept; its theoretical foundations require further development (Green & Young, 2019).

Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how different identity markers intersect, producing distinct forms of domination and subordination (Crenshaw, 1989, 2013). Crenshaw (1991) holds that structural barriers, policies, practices, and norms favour advantaged groups while systematically disadvantaging peripheral groups. Yuval-Davis (2006) conceptualises intersectionality as domains of power, based on structural intersectionality effected through organisational hierarchies, policies and practices that manage oppression.

Leadership and management are complementary and stratified into occupational levels often referred to as categories; however, they differ. Occupational levels range from elementary to semiskilled, and from first-line and/or junior management to middle, senior, and top or executive (Daft, 2015).

Occupational categories or levels represent the job hierarchy and/or grades in which jobs are positioned within organisations (Daft, 2011; DEL, 2023). This study focused on the three uppermost levels of management. The terms management and leadership, as well as top and executive, are used interchangeably. Top management or executive leadership determines the company's vision, mission, and overall organisational strategy. Senior management identifies a business area, company or group and breaks it down into functional plans (Daft, 2015), essentially operationalising the organisational strategy. Middle management has a long line of sight to top leadership, managing the day-to-day operations of departmental units and teams and optimising resources—including finance, materials, and technology—to achieve given objectives (McShane & von Glinow, 2011).

Race was socially/culturally constructed as a tool to oppress and exploit People of Colour (Merriam-Webster, 2019). According to critical race theory, race is considered unnatural (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Race has no basis in innate biological differences, such as phenotypes, human physique, intellect, or other physical or mental attributes (Houston, Kanyane & Davids, 2022). Outside South Africa, People of Colour are those targeted by racism; they include people of African or Asian descent, the indigenous, the native Americans, and those of mixed heritage, while White describes people of European ancestry (Holvino, 2010; Merriam-Webster, 2019; Sims, 2022).

Coloured people in South Africa are not classified as non-white or Black, as in the example above (Adhikari, 2006; Pirtle, 2022). Instead, Coloured refers to people of mixed race who occupy a middle position in the Black-White racial ranking order (Erasmus, 2001; Forbay, 2025; Le Roux & Odeyemi, 2022; Tewolde, 2024). The classification of the Coloured in South Africa was formalised by the apartheid regime's enactment of the Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950. The classification has remained unchanged in post-1994 democratic South Africa (Forbay & Mnguni, 2024; Stone & Erasmus, 2012). In other countries, the identity Coloured is treated with disdain; however, in South Africa, many Coloured people self-identify with the designation (Forbay & Mnguni, 2024; Pirtle, 2022, 2023; Tewolde, 2024).

Black referred to indigenous people of Africa, Africans, during the apartheid era (Terreblanche, 2002). In the current democratic dispensation, **African** is used, and in many instances, this group is still referred to as Black(s) and some Africans identify with it, although legislation uses Black to mean the

previously disadvantaged by race, being African, Coloured and Indian (Dlamini, 2013; Tewolde, 2024). To distinguish between the groups, the term "Black African" is commonly used to denote African.

Race and race relations remain contentious issues in South Africa. Houston et al. (2022) posit that it is impractical to address race in South Africa without applying racial expressions created by the apartheid regime. In this study, the EEA post-apartheid racial and gender classifications of White African, Coloured, Indian and White are operative identity markers. Throughout the thesis, the term Black, with an uppercase first letter, denotes African and/or **Black** African. In contrast, **black**, in lowercase, denotes the collective of previously disadvantaged groups, namely African, Coloured, and Indian (Jaga et al., 2018). It was expedient to continue using the race categories to assess how they intersected to shape the lived experiences of women leaders.

Sex and sexual orientation: the former refers to the genetic makeup between males and females, while the latter concerns whom an individual is attracted to (Jun, 2024). Sexual orientation types are heterosexuality, homosexuality, asexuality, bisexuality, and pan sexuality (Jun, 2024).

Social capital is the “resource available to actors because of their location in the structure of their social relations” (Adler & Kwon, 2002:18). In his classic handbook of the forms of capital, Bourdieu (1986) argued that the world had three forms of capital: economic, which is monetary; cultural, which is based on education attained from prestigious institutions of learning; and social, which is accumulated through connections with significant others. He added that cultural capital was also expressed in ways that earned individuals’ societal recognition and status. One of the benefits derived from such social relations is access to important information, awareness of available opportunities, and a greater likelihood of career growth in the workplace (Bourdieu, 2018; Podolny & Baron, 1997). Social capital is influenced by one or more elitist characteristics, such as family connections, prestige and intellectual, corporate, bank and political ties (D’Este et al., 2025). Social capital can be described as low or high, depending on the outcomes it yields for the recipient (Claridge, 2020). While there are different descriptors of social capital, such as more or less social capital (Claridge, 2020; Lin, 2017), in this study, social capital is classified as high or low (Claridge, 2020).

Social class is defined as the social position people occupy based on their economic status, status and prestige in society, including cultural norms, education, occupation, the trappings of a privileged lifestyle, and the groups they associate with (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

1.13 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

“One way researchers may align themselves with the struggles of their disregarded subjects is in intersectional theorising by drawing explicitly on the personal narratives” (Lu, 2018:81).

I am a Black African woman born, schooled and raised in South African townships, first in Mdantsane, near East London, and later in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. There is no way I could not be aware of the socioeconomic disparities in South Africa, having experienced discrimination myself. I acknowledge my own biases as a Black African woman, whose life was and still is embedded in institutions and a society shaped by the remnants of historical identity schisms.

In my professional career, I rose through the ranks from junior to executive leadership roles across various South African private sector organisations. I was a Human Resources (HR) Director in the financial services sector and voluntarily took retirement in the second quarter of 2025. Working in the HR field brings about personal experiences of career mobility and related challenges. I experienced working during the tail end of the apartheid era and the emergence of the democratic dispensation of South Africa. I have developed and practised HR policies and am familiar with employment equity legislation. As an HR practitioner, I have overseen a wide range of human resources matters. I have consistently leaned towards what I deemed fair and sensible across the spectrum, aligning myself with those often overlooked.

I have had “insider” experiences with staff and leadership, where I was deemed a “trusted advisor” and, at times, an “outsider” when people felt I was going against the grain or that our worldviews differed. I have observed best practices and successes, while also witnessing unfair treatment of those who were “othered”, including my own experiences. I am drawn to matters of fairness and creating moments of truth for all, especially for those who have been marginalised and overlooked. The reality is, I cannot do so alone. This study aimed to contribute to a collective effort to develop talent and challenge the exclusion and stagnation of women leaders at the middle-management level. For the above reasons, I undertook studies in the Doctor of Business Leadership programme. It was therefore key for me to exercise reflexivity throughout the research process and the meaning-making of participants' realities. An outline of this thesis is presented in the next segment.

In this study, I took moments to reflect through journaling, acknowledging my own preconceived ideas about what participants shared immediately after interviews. I also discussed my feelings during individual sessions with my supervisor. At other times, I shared my experiences during peer debriefing sessions. The idea of open-ended interview questions mitigated opportunities for bias,

enabling participants to share their thoughts unreservedly. The measures implemented to mitigate bias are discussed in more detail in Section 4.10. 5 Reflexivity, on pages 119 to 120.

1.14 LAYOUT OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1 presents the introduction and background, situates the study both empirically and theoretically, and identifies knowledge and practice gaps. The problem statement identifies the issue, enabling the formulation of the research aim, objectives and research questions. The significance, delimitations and key concepts are explained. The researcher's positionality in relation to this inquiry, and particularly the participants, is discussed.

Chapter 2 presents intersectionality as the key conceptual framework. It traces the origins of intersectionality and examines its implications. Arguments for and against intersectionality are put forward. This chapter advances the web of intersectionality as a metaphor that guided this study. The chapter concludes by justifying the choice of intersectionality as the theoretical lens for examining the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders in South African private-sector organisations.

Chapter 3 presents a literature review that lays the foundation for the research. The literature is presented in sections, beginning with a synthesised account of social role theories and the subsequent barriers to leadership. The literature on diversity and its impact on women in leadership is explored as a viable solution. The extant literature on intersectional studies of private sector organisations is presented. Finally, the literature on the identity categories under focus is reviewed.

Chapter 4 sets out the research philosophy and the paradigms underpinning the study. The research approach, the accompanying methodological choices, the reasons for the chosen research strategy and the time horizon of the inquiry are briefly explained, followed by a discussion of the study population and the sampling method. The data collection and analysis methods are justified. The rigour criterion and related techniques are explained to demonstrate how the study's trustworthiness was ensured. Adherence to ethical considerations is covered.

Chapter 5 presents the research themes and subthemes that emerged from participants' firsthand experiences. The discussion of each theme and subtheme draws on related literature to substantiate the findings. This chapter provides strategies for policymakers, private sector leaders and aspiring young women to consider. Finally, a conceptual framework grounded in the study's findings is presented, and the chapter is summarised.

Chapter 6 concludes the study by highlighting its contribution to knowledge, organisational practices and government policy, while outlining its limitations. Recommendations are presented for

future practice and for areas for research exploration. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection on the research experience.

1.15 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter reviewed theoretical developments that identified persistent structural barriers contributing to gender inequalities within the private sector. Inequalities faced by women leaders in middle, senior and executive leadership positions were problematised. The body of literature exposed both knowledge and practice gaps. Intersectionality was chosen as a prism for investigating power and subordination arising from the intersection of race, gender, age and social capital in a multilayered context. Gender transformation in South African private sector organisations was considered, given the country's socio-historical and legal context, which prioritised racial emancipation over gender equality. The empirical context revealed perennial inequalities that impede the progress of the African and Coloured women majority, while advancing their Indian and White counterparts. It is apparent that disparities among groups at work persist in the post-apartheid era in South African private sector workplaces, and the EEA alone is insufficient to deliver inclusive workplaces. Workplace initiatives, such as diversity and inclusion, are often driven by metrics and a profit-focused approach, which dilutes the intent of the EEA. Additionally, the study's significance and delimitations were discussed. My own positionality as a researcher was scrutinised. The next chapter introduces the key conceptual framework, which anchors this study.

CHAPTER 2: KEY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce intersectionality as a key conceptual framework for this study. First, however, it is essential to provide a historical account of feminist theories, as represented by the 'waves' metaphor. The waves of feminism offer a backdrop against which the key conceptual framework of this study can be understood. Each era and its impact on women in the workforce is critically evaluated. Intersectionality is then addressed, together with its definition and genesis, the debates and contestations surrounding it, and its applicability to the current study. The web of intersectionality is then presented as a guiding metaphor for the study. Compelling arguments are made for intersectionality as a suitable conceptual framework for the study. In this study, intersectionality was used to examine the interlocking influences of race, gender, age, and social capital among African and Coloured women leaders across multi-layered contexts (Collins, 2019; 2020; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Lewis, 2017).

2.2 WAVES OF FEMINISM

Feminism is a movement that aims to end gender discrimination and achieve gender equality in society at large and across various relational spaces, including work organisations (hooks, 2000; Malinowska, 2020; UN Women, 2025). Drawing on feminist thought, many scholars have, over the years, problematised the predominance of masculine power in the workplace and the persistence of women's marginalisation (Ali, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Gross & Xie, 2024; Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019; Tshenyego, 2023). The following paragraphs provide an overview of the various waves of feminist theory and offer historical context for understanding intersectionality.

2.2.1 First wave

The first wave of feminism began with liberalism in the 1840s and up to the early 20th century (Gherardi, 2009; Orolic, 2021; Rampton, 2015). The liberalists agitated for White women's suffrage, or the right to vote; equal access to education; and formal employment rather than domestic duties (Calas & Smircich, 1996; Malinowska, 2020; Hart, 2006; Yahya, Anwar & Zaki, 2021). Calas and Smircich (1989) associate the theory with women seeking to prove their equality with men in work tasks. Liberalism pushed women to either conform to preexisting work practices or adopt the notion that there are no differences between women and men (Alcoff, 2006; Bendl, 2000; Calas & Smircich, 1989). Such activism, however, appeared to position men as the gold standard for gender equality and rendered women and, in particular, Women of Colour (WOC), invisible (Ferry, 2025; hooks, 2000).

According to the Combahee River Collective (CRC), the liberal feminist lens on gender equality denied the existence of sexual differences and focused on equal opportunities in the workplace (CRC, 1977).

In the 1970s, a radical feminist wave emerged, building on liberal ideas and denouncing patriarchy as the primary cause of women's oppression across all domains of society (Ferry, 2025; Pierik, 2022; Walby, 1990). Radical feminists decried the assimilation of women into a hegemonic androcentric culture, affirming their agency in determining their unique needs themselves (Gherardi, 2009; Pierik, 2022). In addition, they denounced the patriarchal system and agitated for social and legal equality across all spheres of life, including education, employment, domestic work, and reproductive rights (Ferry, 2025; Malinowska, 2020; Yayha et al., 2021). While this marked a progressive departure from liberal feminism, it remained unclear which women were included in radical feminism. Ferry (2025) and hooks (2000) interrogated who was included in such a theorisation and concluded that. Likewise, Malinowska (2022), Orolic (2020), and Pierik (2022) found that radicalism aligned more closely with the experiences and conditions of White middle-class women, thereby failing to recognise the cultural and historical circumstances of Women of Colour. Radical feminism was silent on multiple oppressions experienced by Black women, including race, gender and social capital.

The first wave of feminism placed the onus for confronting gender inequality on women rather than on men, an impediment stemming from workplace culture and societal norms (Acker, 1990; Calas & Smircich, 1996; Hart, 2006). Black, Latina, and Chicana women pointed out their invisibility in prevailing theorisations, and stressed that they “were present” all along yet were disregarded (Davis, 1983; hooks, 1990; Lorde, 1985). Concurrently, the Combahee River Collective (1977) expressed dissatisfaction with exclusion based on sexual orientation. It can be inferred that both liberal and radical feminist frameworks were inadequate for gauging the impact of social categories on Black and White working-class women (Mohajan, 2022; Pierik, 2022).

2.2.2 Second wave

The second wave, known as “the personal is political,” took place in the 1960s and ended in the 1990s, with women's personal lives interwoven with politics and characterised by diverse standpoints (Orolic, 2021). Firstly, socialist feminism condemned the exploitation of women through unpaid domestic work or low wages (Armstrong, 2020; Yayla et al., 2021). It interrogated class and gender oppression and called for the abolition of capitalism to liberate women (Calas & Smircich, 1996; Hart, 2006). Socialist feminists often neglected the responsibilities of single women, such as childcare and household work, which were traditionally women's primary responsibilities (Ali, 2019; Armstrong,

2020; Gherardi, 2009). Thus, the socialist wave shifted its focus toward class and gender, and, admittedly, toward identity politics, albeit unintentionally (Acker, 1990; Mohajan, 2022).

The Black Civil Rights movement, in contrast, influenced women's groups across racial and sexual lines to protest the oppression of women in all spheres of life and to demand equal rights (Ferry, 2025; Moharajan, 2022; Rampton, 2015). The Women's Liberation Movement was one such group that denounced patriarchy and the objectification of women. It pressed for the eradication of cultural inequalities related to sexuality, reproductive rights, equal pay, protection against domestic violence and political issues (Hanisch, 2006; Mann & Huffman, 2005; Tas, 2021). In the early 1980s, the second wave of feminism was beset with internal disagreements, with a focus on sexism as experienced by upper-class women, exclusion of other countries' perspectives and a homogenised vision of feminism (Beal, 1971; Butler, 1990; CRC, 1977; Ferry, 2025; Lorde, 1985; Pierik, 2022; Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher & Nkomo, 2016). Hence, for Beal (1971), sisterhood between White and Black women was implausible.

2.2.3 Third wave

The 1990s are described as the era of the third wave of feminism, which was motivated by dissatisfaction with earlier waves and informed by postmodernist, poststructuralist, postfeminist, and Women of Colour thinking (Gherardi, 2009; Mann & Huffman, 2005; Orolic, 2021). The taken-for-granted binary notions, such as man or woman, were challenged and labelled as social constructs shaped by historical and cultural contexts and reinforced through language (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Bendl, 2009). According to postfeminists, “her” being a “woman” was negation, and a reinforcement of the “ordained” gender (Butler, 1999; Calas & Smircich, 1989; Hartsock, 1987). Universalisation of whiteness and masculinity left the privileged with bias (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991, 2013; Davis, 1983). Post-feminists rejected the absence of Women of Colour from current theorisations and debates in the Third World and other regions (Rampton, 2015; Mann & Huffman, 2005). During this era, Black women and/or women of colour reshaped the feminist narrative, recognising social identity markers and their fluidity as important. This signalled the emergence of “intersectionality” (Brah & Phoenix, 2023; Mann & Huffman, 2005; Rampton, 2015). The third wave, therefore, sought to dismantle the homogenisation of womanhood and de-centre masculinity

2.2.4 Post-colonial global wave

Although segregation, bias, and inequality are universal, their expression is contextual. Notwithstanding commonalities among women, cultural and economic factors vary across backgrounds (Chang & Yulp, 2002; hooks, 2000). Postcolonial feminists question Western masculine schools of

thought on knowledge production, which devalue the “other” while imposing a single perspective as the standard (Gherardi, 2009; Tas, 2021). Feminist writings have been documented, debated, and critiqued; however, gender remains linked to difference, inequality, and power positions (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Gherardi, 2009). There was recognition of a need to amplify neglected areas, such as women who do not fit First World notions of being, and re-examination of single-issue frameworks (Crenshaw, 1989; Steinfield et al., 2019; UN Women, 2025). Postcolonial globalist feminists advocate workplace equality and contest the exclusion of Women of Colour (Holvino, 2010; Yahya et al., 2021). hooks (1989) and Crenshaw (1989) posit that Western feminism is unable to relate to the peculiar circumstances that Women of Colour encountered by eliding race and gender and continuing to serve only the interests of White middle-class women. Globally, women appeared to agree on the need to acknowledge contextual differences to address gender disparities (Forbay & Mnguni, 2024; Smith & Nkomo, 2021; Tas, 2021; UN Women, 2025).

2.3 ORIGINS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

The term intersectionality derives from the critical legal framework of Crenshaw (1989), who highlighted how the law prejudiced African American women by interpreting their experiences through a single lens that separated race from gender (Atewolugun, 2018). It arose because existing feminist politics were unable to address the unique difficulties experienced by Black women in the United States (hooks, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Rodrigues et al., 2016). As many have pointed out, Intersectionality did not begin with Crenshaw's (1989) coinage of the term (Collins, 2022). Its origins, instead, can be traced back to early Black feminists. These included but were not limited to Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hammer, Frances Beal, Anna Julia Cooper, the Combahee River Collective, Wells Barnett, Mary MacCleod, Gloria Anzaldua, and bell hooks (Carastathis, 2014; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Davis, 1983; Dill & Kohlman, 2014; Gopaldas, 2013; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017).

At a Women's Rights Convention organised by the White feminist movement in 1851, Sojourner Truth, a black woman who had experienced cruel treatment and slavery firsthand, contested the claim made that women were weaker than men. In her “Ain't I a woman” rebuttal (hooks, 1990; King, 1988), she did so by exposing both racism and classism (Davis, 2011). Until Sojourner Truth's speech, no one had questioned the essence of being a woman, the characteristics that define what it means to be a woman under horrendous conditions in such a profound way (Brah and Phoenix, 2023; hooks, 1981). Sojourner Truth's earnest account of her lived experiences foregrounded not only the oppression of social class and gender differences and subsequent privileges that were oblivious to White feminists, but also racial discrimination that Black women were subjected to (hooks, 2000; Tas, 2021). Truth

exposed the schism between the erasure of Black women's experiences and the frivolity of White women's complaints and the patriarchal view of attendant White men.

hooks (2000), taking the cue from Truth's lament, writes a monograph about her life experiences growing up in a patriarchal family, the physical spatial divide in her neighbourhood, and being subjected to hostile college peers, which were all marked with racism, sexism and class differences. While at university, hooks was scorned for her Southern American geographic origins and made to feel the intensity of social class differences (hooks, 1981). hooks (2000b) maintains that feminism is centred on sexism; however, it cannot be divorced from the liberation struggle, for it was aimed at dismantling patriarchy. hooks (1981, 2000), in her "Ain't I a Woman, monograph, is credited with being the first feminist scholar to articulate how the lives of Black and White women differed; the former were prejudiced based on both race and gender discrimination, while the latter faced gender discrimination. This she called double oppression of Black women from slavery until the modern times, devalued by the noun women, which referred to White women only, while Black in terms of race meant Black men (hooks, 1981, 2000; Davis, 2011). Similarly, Collins (2002) and Golpades (2013) say that the Civil Rights Movement prioritised Black men, while feminist organisations prioritised White women, both in pursuit of equality with White men, while pushing aside Black women. hooks (2000a, 2000b) stresses that, to seek equality with men is folly, equality could not coexist with the dominant white capitalist patriarchy. Black men, on the other hand, were themselves subjugated (hooks, 2000b). hooks (2000a) declares that Black women were brutalised and oppressed in four ways through rape, flogging, reproduction and idealisation of white womanhood. Their suffering was omitted from scholarly work until her treatise was published; she is the first woman to write a provocative text in which Black women in America are the primary focus of analysis (Cooke, 2012; Tas, 2021).

Fannie Lou Hamer was an eloquent speaker who galvanised Black men and women during a 1964 campaign to form the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The party's goal was to enlighten the nation about the exclusion of Black people (Hamlet, 1996). Hamer was appointed the party's first vice chairperson. She encouraged others to join the fight against racism, poverty, and injustice, and her legacy of leadership is evident today in the political presence of African Americans across the United States, particularly the rapid emergence of African American women (White, 2017). Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative was established to serve Black families under politically repressive conditions. The cooperative enabled food security, education, affordable, safe housing and an incubator for small businesses. Collins (1990) credits Hamer with the ability to influence agency and development, working with the people drawn from her community, both women and men, for their benefit.

Frances Beal (2008) rebukes the capitalist system, which annihilated generations of Black men, women and children who live in the United States of America, by subjugating Black men economically and Black women through degrading jobs and physical harm. The archetype of a real man is a wealthy man who leads a lavish lifestyle. Black men's unpaid labour and/ or meagre wages and slave conditions could never measure up (Beal, 2008). Meanwhile, White women were homemakers whose role was to bear children, while most Black women had no choice but to be a greater part of the workforce (Gray, 2018; Wagner, 2013). These conditions caused strife in Black families. Beal (2008) emphasises that there could be no emancipation of Black people without the involvement of Black women in the fight for liberation. Beal (2008) and King (1988) argue that, just as Black men were discriminated against, Black women experienced gender violence in ways that Black men could never be subjected to. Abetz and Moore (2018) and King (1988) uphold that Beal theorised about the connection of race and sex, concluding that Black women suffered on two accounts, and named such concurrence the double jeopardy. Similarly, Collins (2002) asks why Black women were treated in a heavy-handed manner if women were the fair sex, essentially asking Sojourner Truth's question differently.

In 1968, Beal became a founding member of Black Women's Liberation Committee, which later became the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA). TWWA members conducted interviews with working-class women of colour and published their newspaper, *Triple Jeopardy*. In 1971, Beal, as editor of *Triple Jeopardy*, published an article titled "Triple Jeopardy," arguing that Black women's struggle was against racism, sexism, and imperialism in the United States (Romney, 2021; Wilson, 2023). The *Triple Jeopardy* newspaper had reached Black, Latina, and Asian women, and Frances Beal wrote about topics that the mainstream media avoided. Women of Colour learnt about one another's daily struggles with poverty, patriarchy, and reproductive injustices from the *Triple Jeopardy* newspaper. Comparably, way before Beal, in the 1930s, Louis Thompson, a pioneering Black communist, is credited with minting the term triple oppression to highlight the oppression of Black women, highlighting connections between racism, gender and class exploitation (Butler-Barnes, Evans, Leath, Burnett & Inniss-Thompson, 2023; Schchurko, 2025). In the same way, Claudia Jones, a Marxist thinker, fused triple oppression by incorporating race and gender for a communist audience already familiar with a class-based system, society, and organisations (McCausland, 2020; Tas, 2023). Jones, a White woman activist, focused on Black women who were oppressed as a social class by other classes (Gourianov, 2023).

In 1977, a Black feminist organisation that worked with other progressive groups and political movements, the Combahee River Collective (CRC), also drew on Chicana and Latina women and challenged the system of omitting sexuality as a social category (Davis, 2011). The Combahee River

Collective developed the Black Feminist Statement, which advocated including all interlocking systems of oppression within feminist thought, particularly for women of colour and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community (CRC, 1977). The Combahee River Collective's call to action and its focus on the LGBTQ community were bold steps in making sexual orientation a visible identity marker.

Feminist politics were influenced by Black women's oral accounts of their experiences and memoirs (hooks, 1990; King, 1988). White feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett and Mary Daly drew inspiration from this group in their evaluation of patriarchy (King, 1988). Black women's experiences were understood to be the same as those of White women and Black men, such that there was no need for feminists to validate the assumption (King, 1988; McCall, 2005). Such supposition masked the essential differences between Black people and women (Crenshaw, 1989, 1990; McCall, 2005). It obliterated the fact that Black women went through discrimination and violent oppression targeted at them only (Crenshaw, 1991; Grzanka & Cole, 2022; hooks, 1990). The exclusion of Black women from feminist activism, political dialogue and identity politics was unjustified (Abetz & Moore, 2018; Crenshaw, 1989; King, 1988).

Claudia Jones, like Sojourner Truth, Gloria Anzaldua, Patrica Collins, bell hooks, Frances Beal, and Louise Thompson Patterson may not have mentioned intersectionality in their praxis, but it is difficult to ignore their theorisation of the Black women's subjugation in America (Butler-Barnes et al., 2023; Gourianov, 2023; hooks, 1989; McCausland, 2020; Shcchurko, 2025; Tas, 2021). These women leaders recognised that the intricacies of Black women's lives could not be adequately addressed through simplistic identity markers, long before formal debates on intersectionality began (Wagner, 1986). In essence, the use of single identities was insufficient to dismantle inequalities.

2.4 WHY DOES INTERSECTIONALITY MATTER?

As shown above, Intersectionality emerged in the late 1980s from critical race studies, through a lawsuit brought by Black women against their employers, in which Kimberlé Crenshaw represented the defendants. Crenshaw (1989) argued that policy and legal systems failed to examine oppression from Black women's perspectives. She revealed how various forms of discrimination occurred at once, exacerbating each other to produce domination. Intersectionality disrupts race- and gender-neutral frameworks and illuminates the suffering of those at the societal margins by exposing subordination and advantage (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Gasdaglis & Madva, 2019). The lens underscores the multidimensionality of marginalised subjects' lived experiences (Esnard, 2024; Grzanka, 2020). In a similar vein, Delgado and Stefancic (2023) state that individuals do not live with a single, unitary

identity; one person can possess multiple identities. It considers the historical contexts in which women's social identities are constructed (Crenshaw, 1989; Hankivsky, 2022; hooks, 2000; Steinfield et al., 2019). This is essential for ensuring that the production of knowledge takes cognisance of the experiences that shape each woman's stance (Rodriguez et al., 2016; Smith & Nkomo, 2021). The approach enables Black women to move from the periphery of society to the centre through articulating their distinctive experiences (Crenshaw, 1990).

Intersectionality enables the inquirer to recognise that individuals, institutions, and social structures are interconnected, that both power and subordination are discernible simultaneously (McKinzie & Richards, 2019). The intersectional lens seeks to address all forms of inequality, regardless of who is prejudiced, until social justice has been achieved (Collins, 2020; Grzanka, 2020; hooks, 1990; King, 1988). To this extent, Gasdaglis and Madva (2019) are convinced that the best way to understand the lived realities of people in the world is through intersectionality, which reveals how practices of inequality, the production of knowledge and meanings, identity development, and the construction of social institutions, practices, and policies are determined. As discussed, while the importance of intersectionality in achieving justice in society and workplaces is becoming increasingly apparent, the concept is not without its critics. It remains a part of ongoing debates and contestations.

2.5 INTERSECTIONALITY – CONTESTATIONS AND DEBATES

Intersectionality has been under scrutiny since its inception (Hankivsky, 2022; Grzanka, 2020). Social identity categories have been conflated in the analysis. Yuval-Davis (2006) and Delgado (2010) describe it as additive. Crenshaw's analysis for being confined to race and gender (Collins, 2020; Nash, 2008; McCall, 2005). They argued that it showed no consideration of sexual orientation or social class, for example. Other scholars employed narratives and poetry, arguing that oppression could be reframed as something positive (William, 1989; Wing, 1990; Matsuda, 1990).

Delgado (2010) and Ehrenreich (2002) maintain that intersectionality is problematic because a scholar might find fault with the identity marker selected for examination, rendering it irrelevant. They would then formulate another one. In this way, the authors contend, intersectionality divides identity into ever-smaller subgroups, leaving no sensible markers of identity beyond the individual. Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that successive additions of social identity categories erase the lived experiences of marginalised groups. According to Yuval-David, there appear to be no reparations in sight for the disadvantaged people that intersectionality is intended to assist. Delgado and Stefancic (2023) and Nash (2008), on the other hand, claim that intersectionality perpetuates essentialism. They suggest that some Women of Colour are in good standing with respect to gender and social class and, in some instances,

are even better off than their male counterparts. It looks like the scholars are asking, which Black women, and/or are Black women a homogenous group? Furthermore, the essentialist trap stalls empirical progress, as another group would produce its own characteristics (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). It is evident from the above criticisms that, in some circles, the concept of intersectionality is stirring up a hornet's nest (Lucas, 2024).

Yuval-Davis (2006) remarks that intersectionality has been interpreted and classified in different ways by scholars, organisations, institutions, and human rights activists. Additionally, Grzanka (2020) notes that there is debate over whether it is a theory and/or praxis. Although McCall (2005) heralds intersectionality as the greatest contribution to feminist studies, she and other scholars, including Davis (2008), contend that its methodology remains underdeveloped. McCall (2005) subsequently expounds three intersectional methodologies: anti-categorical, intra-categorical, and inter-categorical intersectionality, to close this gap. Anti-categorical focuses on broad social groupings, contending that social categories such as race and gender were too simplistic to capture the intricacies of lived experiences. An example here would be studying all Black women as opposed to all people living with a disability (Lucas, 2024; Nash, 2008). The inter-categorical analysis posits that disparities among people exist, thereby making them the centre of analysis through identifying the connections between them (McCall, 2005). The last category is intra-categorical complexity, which treats marginalised intersectional identities as an analytical starting point for revealing the lived experiences of a select group. Nash (2008) points out that categorical intersections are seldom applied, whereas Collins (2020) and Lucas (2024) observe that the intra-categorical method is closest to the intersectionality method as it is currently applied.

A certain subset of White feminist scholars dismisses intersectionality as a "buzzword" and characterise it as "oppression Olympics" (Davis, 2008; Martinez, 1993). Davis (2008) is troubled by the overwhelming success of intersectionality and its appeal to both feminist theorists and specialists, as well as to feminist researchers or generalists. Specialists read the theory and subject it to rigorous testing to gain in-depth knowledge, whereas generalists aim to have a sufficient grasp to get by (Davis, 2008). Davis is troubled by this, dubbing intersectionality a buzzword (Lucas, 2024; Nash, 2008). The term "buzzword" seems anomalous in academic literature, casual, and non-complementary, in agreement with Grzanka (2020) and Lucas (2024)

2.6 IN DEFENCE OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Black intersectional scholars responded to criticisms of intersectionality not to suggest that the lens should not be criticised, but to correct misunderstandings. Crenshaw (1991) and Nash (2008) argue

that the challenge of identity politics is that they omit intragroup differences, whereas intersectionality exposes variations both intra- and intergroup. In contrast to single-axis-based approaches, Crenshaw (2018) argued that intersectionality seeks to capture the nuances of identity markers, underscoring that lived experiences cannot be understood in isolation but rather in simultaneity. Collins (2025) and Dennissen et al. (2020) problematised the tendency for non-intersectional schools of thought to treat identity markers as singular, while they in fact mutate and compound, creating advantages or disadvantages for different groups

Andersen and Collins (2016) and Collins and Bilge (2020) observe that the application of the heuristic of race, gender and class for solving problems is frequent, as if scholars are restricted to such. Nilsson (2016) emphasises that it is important to allow the field to determine which identity categories are critical to analysis. Concurring with Collins (2020) and Crenshaw (1989, 1990), Crenshaw (1989, 1990) argues that race, class, and gender are neither fixed nor compulsory, as intersecting systems of power are situational. Collins (2020) and Nilsson (2016) argue that the selection of identity categories is contingent. It is therefore important to allow the field to determine which identity markers are critical to the analysis.

Other intersectionality scholars contend that intersectionality should be understood as an analytic tool, a metaphor, a heuristic, and a paradigm for identifying the invisibility of oppressed women and for amplifying the multiplicity of their experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Gasdaglis & Madva, 2019; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Collins, da Silva, Ergun, Furseth, and Bond et al. (2021) conclude that intersectionality is a heuristic tool. Moreover, Collins (2015) puts forth her persuasive argument that intersectionality has multiple definitions; that it is better understood as a heuristic - a metaphor to guide research, and a paradigm that provides a conceptual foundation for its versatility. The above analysis suggests that it is a multifaceted framework.

Intersectionality may not be the best metaphor for explaining phenomena, but it has persisted (Collins, 2020). Some scholars recognise intersectionality as a metaphor offering alternatives that appear to do a better job of explaining social reality. Grzanka (2014) holds that the way Gloria Anzaldúa describes borderlands is, in fact, a fitting metaphor for Crenshaw's traffic intersecting crossroads metaphor. Anzaldúa (1987) describes the experiences of Latin American and Mexican women through the lens of a meeting place, a metaphor that is a physical border, which influenced her work both politically and intellectually. As with borderlands, intersectionality cannot be captured within existing social theory (Collins, 2020).

Intersectionality foregrounds the lived experiences of those whose voices are muted (Nash, 2008; Wing, 1990). Several intersectional feminists contest the representations of intersectionality by segments of those who resist transformation, such as right-wing populists (Carastathis, 2014; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Holvino, 2010). Grzanka (2022) concurs, positing that the lens is elided in top academic journals and insufficiently applied in workplaces as an investigative tool. For Atewologun (2018), contrary to arguments advanced against intersectionality, the intersection of an individual's visible identity markers with other social locations has a positive effect.

Hankivsky (2022) and Paludi et al. (2015) insist that intersectionality is far from additive; rather, it centres on intermeshing processes that reproduce privilege and oppression. Richardson and Loubier (2008) agree and assert that intersectionality neither appends nor produces autonomous identity markers. For the authors, the alternative to debating whether intersectionality is essentialist is to focus on preventing it and on defining the category of women more clearly. For proponents of intersectionality, opposition to intersectionality is misplaced. These scholars point out instead that feminist theorists are the ones who single out gender as the only unit of analysis. This, to them, is essentialism. Black intersectionality feminists argue that the lens of intersectionality deconstructs gender and integrates it with race (Beal, 1971, 2008; Crenshaw, 1990) and class, forming multiple interlocking categories (Collins, 1990). In pursuing the regulative ideal, it is best to acknowledge that intersectional inquiry is dynamic and continually evolving (Collins, 2020; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Dhamoon, 2011; Esnard, 2024).

Grzanka (2020) emphasises that intersectionality is not confined to any single group and can encompass both oppression and privilege. Focusing on the oppressed, as others suggest, highlights those at the margins (Rice, Harrison & Friedman, 2019; Winer, 2021). As Gasdaglis and Madva (2019) point out, individuals are members of multiple categories, each located along the continuum of repression and advantage. There are, however, some scholars who caution that extending intersectionality analysis to privileged groups risks diverting attention from where it is most needed: multiply disadvantaged groups (McKinzie & Richards, 2019; Purdue-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). The priority should be to bring deprived, marginalised groups into the core of society, as well as its original purpose.

Proponents of intersectionality assert that scholars who characterise intersectionality as overly complex to study compromise knowledge for the sake of practice. Their critique is, as such, prejudiced (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Grzanka, 2020; Grzanka & Cole, 2022; Tripp, 2023). The following section covers the web of intersectionality as a metaphor.

2.7 WEB OF INTERSECTIONALITY

In this study, an intersectional framework is used as an epistemological lens to examine the shortcomings of inclusive workplaces in the South African private sector. Gender inequality in the workplace and the lack of development in meaningful leadership structures are not deliberate choices by women at work. It is structural and should not be separated from prevailing environmental factors, which are realities for specific groups of women (Acker, 2009; Holvino, 2010; Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019). I acknowledge that intersectionality remains a developing theoretical lens and has not yet been fully explored. As Collins & Bilge (2020) point out, thinking so would be premature.

The web of intersectionality, drawn from the spider-web metaphor, served as the basis for this study. As I was wrestling with the meaning of intersectionality, the locations of inequality sprang to mind: the centre and the periphery. I had a vivid image of a spider web, which aptly depicted a few people at the centre of decision-making and many at the margins, with the spider symbolising authority. The web of intersectionality is a fitting metaphor for this study and is incorporated into the Intersectional Career Development Framework, developed from research data (Figure 5.3). The next section further explains the reasons for choosing intersectionality as the key conceptual framework for the current study.

2.8 JUSTIFICATION FOR USING INTERSECTIONALITY

As indicated earlier, the arguments for intersectionality far outweigh the criticisms. The current state of practice in South African private sector organisations suggests a need for new ways of understanding gender transformation. Intersectionality is appealing because it exposes both oppression and privilege. As noted by various scholars, intersectionality reveals how organisational cultures, norms, policies, and practices interlock, thereby shaping people's workplace outcomes (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Esnard, 2024). Hankivsky (2022) and Holvino (2010) note that, although less is known about the framework, it has proven to be a groundbreaking tool for revealing nuances of social injustice and connecting activism with scholarship. It can be inferred that the intersectionality lens brings to prominence those who are otherwise obscure. To centre the voices of African and Coloured women leaders, I employ intersectionality as a conceptual framework for this inquiry.

2.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, feminist eras were presented as waves and as a historic backdrop within which intersectionality can be understood. The feminist turns are accounted for by way of waves, each ebbing and flowing to the next amendments. This chapter examined the merits and drawbacks of feminism, its failures, and the need for an inclusive approach. The chapter traces the genesis of intersectionality from

oral accounts by foremost Black feminists such as Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hamer, and others, to Crenshaw's coining of the term. Intersectionality is discussed critically, including its meaning, ongoing debates, criticisms, and defences. To conclude the chapter, a justification for using intersectionality in the current study is provided. The multiple uses of intersectionality, its distinctive intersecting categories, and their significance in exposing both advantages and disadvantages are described through the metaphor of the web of intersectionality. The chapter concludes with compelling arguments for employing intersectionality as a conceptual framework for this study.

CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the study's aim: to investigate why African and Coloured women leaders plateau in middle management and are subsequently underrepresented in core decision-making positions in South African private-sector organisations. The inquiry is guided by a theoretical perspective and draws on existing literature. An overview of the global state of women in leadership is presented. The social role theory and the enactment of gender roles, along with their effects on women's advancement in leadership, are unpacked through case studies. A critical review of diversity and inclusion theories on the career journeys of women in leadership is conducted. The theoretical, methodological and analytical applications of intersectional leadership are discussed. Finally, strategies to close gaps identified in the literature are proposed.

3.2 CURRENT REALITY OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Women in leadership positions have increased over the centuries, but their representation in senior leadership roles remains insufficient (Dilli, 2025; Earthy & Carli, 2018; UN Women, 2025). Although progress has been made towards gender parity in the global economic participation subindex, women hold only 30% of managerial positions in the private sector, suggesting their share in 2050 will likely be 32% (World Economic Forum, 2025; UN Women, 2025). McKinsey (2022) found that in the United States and Canada, White men dominated all leadership positions, from first-level management to executive suites, followed by White women, then Men of Colour (MOC), and, lastly, Women of Colour (WOC), the least-preferred group.

Sub-Saharan Africa, comprising 36 economies including South Africa, ranks sixth globally in gender transformation, with a gender parity score of 68% in the Economic Participation and Opportunity sub-index (World Economic Forum, 2025). A comprehensive review of literature within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), comprising sixteen countries including South Africa, revealed an imbalance in women's representation in the top tiers of leadership and a preference for men (April, Dreyer & Blass, 2007; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024; Tshenyego, 2023).

The situation in South African private sector organisations is no different (Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022). The Businesswomen's Association of South Africa (BWASA, 2021) presents a picture similar to that of the Women in the Workplace aggregated report (BWASA, 2021). BWASA is a voluntary association of professional women across all industry sectors in South Africa, aiming to create networking and mentoring platforms and to recognise women (BWASA, 2021). Maphisa of BWASA (2021) raised concerns about the invisibility of women in leadership positions in South African

industries, estimating that it would take 14 years to achieve parity with men. In the same vein, the Employment Equity Act (EEA) and gender frameworks developed to enable gender transformation are not yielding the desired solutions (April et al., 2007; Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Luiz & Terziev, 2024; Syster et al., 2023).

Globally, private-sector companies are major employers (UN Women, 2025). In South Africa, the private sector employs 72,7% of the economically active population, followed by the government at 10,2%. The private sector is better positioned than the government to create space for gender parity (Stats SA, 2024; CEE, 2024). The sector is expected to have a broad impact on gender transformation within and outside organisations, extending to the societies served (Cloutier, 2021; Henisz, Koller & Nuttall, 2019; CEE, 2023), yet African and Coloured women leaders' representation flattens in middle level leadership roles and declines at senior and executive (top) leadership levels, as demonstrated in Table 1.1 (South African private sector leadership demographics 2019–2025). Rajha and Ruiters (2025) argue that gender bias drives the ongoing under-representation of women in senior leadership roles within male-led private-sector organisations in South Africa.

Legislation alone is insufficient to eliminate systemic discrimination; the private sector must do more (Bosch, 2025; UN Women, 2025). Driving gender transformation in South African private-sector organisations is at best half-hearted. In a Deloitte global study of 5,000 women participants including South Africa, it was found that gender equality regressed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 5% of women and 3,5% of men losing their jobs. Women in leadership literature largely focuses on women as a homogenous group, Women of Colour in the Global North, and within the South African private sector, those in the highest tiers of leadership, such as executive and non-executive board members (April et al., 2007; Bosch, 2025; Dlamini, 2013; Zajiji, Wilson-Prangle & Ndletyana, 2021). Gender transformation is more than a compliance obligation; it is a moral issue and a Sustainable Development Goal (UN Women, 2025). The beginnings of feminism were about securing formal professional employment in workplaces, thereby de-marginalising women; this endeavour has been only partially achieved (Acker, 2009; Malinowska, 2020). To understand the various barriers and opportunities women in leadership encounter in the workplace, it is essential to draw on a range of gender-theoretical frameworks.

3.3 KEY THEORIES OF GENDER INEQUALITY

Major theories and frameworks have emerged from several disciplines to explain why women are stalled at lower levels of leadership and, consequently, are underrepresented at the highest rungs of organisational leadership (Acker, 1990; Dashper, Gross & Xie, 2024; Eagly & Carli, 2018). This

literature review examines social role theory and its sub-theories, including role congruence and role incongruence, which define gender roles and norms in the workplace. The next segment reviews commonly held gender stereotypes that serve as identifiable barriers to women's advancement, drawing on both global and local studies. These include defined gender roles, ambivalent sexism, work-life conflict, hegemonic masculinity cultures and norms, disproportionate networks, and social identity stereotypes. Proposals are offered to mitigate adverse effects on women leaders through human resources practices. The literature on workplace diversity and inclusion is examined, with particular attention to intersectional leadership studies.

Existing literature in social psychology demarcates roles using binary gender definitions and utilises theories of sex roles and stereotypes to explore workplace gaps (Eagly, 2018; Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann & Sczesny, 2020; Hanek, 2018). Furthermore, Dilli (2025) and Hanek and Garcia (2022) posit that the division of roles between men and women is grounded in societal expectations, hence the social role theory. The nature of work differs. Research has consistently shown that women's responsibilities are more likely to involve childcare, domestic, and communal work, whereas men are perceived as focused on self, possibly holding formal employment and serving as providers for families (Eagly & Koenig, 2021; Hanek, 2021; Richardson & Loubser, 2008). The workplace has adopted social theory, with women occupying roles associated with nurturing and empathy, while men are typically assigned occupations that require strength, agency, and assertiveness (Eagly et al., 2020; Hanek & Garcia, 2022; Perrin et al., 2023). This tendency reinforces gender stereotypes, limiting women's access to roles considered masculine (Eagly & Koenig, 2021). Any deviation by women in leadership roles might lead to role incongruity and alienation from both their male and female counterparts. In contrast, conformity with the requirements of the assigned traditional gender roles is met with approval (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Richardson & Loubser, 2008). Role incongruity is a contradiction between the conventional gender roles and the attributes enacted by the holder, leading to perceiver dissonance and prejudice (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Festinger, 1957). It is argued that role incongruity extends beyond gender to other social identity markers, such as race, age, occupation, and others (Eagly et al., 2020). Women leaders' choices are constrained by workplace prejudice that restricts access to atypical positions.

It can be inferred from the works of Eagly and Karau (2002), Eagly et al. (2020) and Koenig and Eagly (2021) that social role theories inevitably influence gender role allocations in the workplace. Similarly, Hanek and Garcia (2022) state that gender theories of difference confine both women and men to follow the prescribed norms at work. When women occupy roles defined for men, role incongruity arises, and the appointees may be perceived negatively (Hanek, 2021). However, this may

depend on individual gender role ideologies; some may internalise traditional roles, whereas others may not (Lizzio-Wilson, Masser, Hornsey & Iyer, 2021). The next segment addresses gender representation in the private sector.

3.3.1 Role congruency in the private sector

Progress has been made in increasing the number of women in leadership positions in the private sector, but obstacles remain to their advancement into strategic roles. In the second half of the 20th century, the proportion of women in the workforce relative to men was 46,9% in the United States of America (USA) and Canada (Geiger & Parker, 2018). Hanek and Garcia (2022) and Catalyst (2021) report that, in 2020, 30% of Standard & Poor's board directors were women, and 26% were chief executive officers, an increase of 15% from the previous year. Meanwhile, although there has been a positive shift in gender representation in junior and middle-line management in European countries, inequality persists in influential leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2002; Hanek & Garcia, 2022; McKinsey & LeanIn.org, 2025). According to McKinsey & LeanIn.org (2025), the global sex ratio of promotions to managerial roles in corporations remains at 93 women per 100 men. The share of Women of Colour among the 93 is 82% for Asians and Latinas, and 60% for Black women. Women leaders still face hurdles in advancing to strategic leadership levels, with Women of Colour in the margins and Black women leaders furthest from the top (McKinsey & LeanIn.org, 2025; UN Women, 2025). The above findings are comparable to those of South African private-sector organisations.

The top and senior leadership composition of men in South African private sector organisations at the end of 2024 was 71,5% and 60,5%, respectively, and the corresponding share of all women leaders was 25,7% and 23,4%, respectively. White males dominated at both occupational levels (51% and 34%), followed by Indian men (8,2% and 8,1%), although the economically active population (EAP) for these groups is 4,1% and 1,7%, respectively. Women combined constituted only a quarter of the total gender composition, broken down as follows: White (37,7%), Indian (9,2%), Coloured (6,3), and African (14,6%) against respective EAP proportions of 3,4%, 1%, 4,2% and 37,5% for the same occupation levels, top and senior leadership combined. The dearth of African and Coloured women leaders is conspicuous.

In this study, the critical mass of women in the Global North plateaus at entry- and mid-level management positions; in the South African context, African and Coloured women stagnate at these levels. There is a long line of sight to pivotal leadership functions in both foreign countries under review and in local settings, as women's representation hovers at 30% and 25%, respectively (Hanek & Garcia, 2022; McKinsey & LeanIn.org, 2025). The data presented in the above segments confirms the views of

Eagly et al. (2020), Hanek and Garcia (2022), and Syster et al. (2023) that advancement to high-impact functions is a preserve of men, while women's progress is incremental, limiting them to operational roles such as caring and soft skills aligned with traditional social roles. The findings of this study are consistent with Eagly and Koenig's (2021) assertions regarding the appointment of women and men. The ascription of women's appointments to men is likely to bring about gender role incongruence as perceived by both men and women in their organisations (Koenig & Eagly, 2021) and to be met with cynicism and a lack of support for deviating from the norm (Hanek & Garcia, 2022). Furthermore, Myeza and April (2021) and Syster et al. (2023) hold that a certain segment of women are atypical candidates for strategic decision-making functions in the South African private sector, a finding that is consistent with women who share similar social identities, as confirmed in the abovementioned study (McKinsey & LeanIn.org, 2025). Judging by the preferred order of upward mobility in private-sector organisations, African and Coloured women leaders are deemed misfits in senior leadership roles, constrained by cultural, racial, and gender preferences (CEE, 2022, 2023, 2024; Mnguni & Dlamini, 2025). In the next section, ambivalent sexism and its impact on women in leadership are discussed.

3.3.2 Ambivalent sexism intensifies gender roles

Glick and Fiske (1997) expound on gender roles through their theory of ambivalent sexism, which is an orientation towards women of hostile or benevolent sexism. Hostility is shown by men who believe that women are incompetent and unfit to exercise power in the workplace, confining them to traditional domestic roles (Barreto & Doyle, 2023; Lizzio-Wilson, Masser & Hornsey, 2021). In contrast, benevolent sexism entails the ostensibly kind yet condescending treatment of women (Lizzio-Wilson et al., 2021). Both dispositions harm women, albeit in different ways (Glick & Fiske, 2018). Hostile sexism leads to the rejection of women leaders and adversarial relations with them, giving rise to diminished growth as they are perceived as deviating from the traditional subtype of women (Glick & Fiske, 2018). Conversely, benevolent sexism, which might sound like kind behaviour, constitutes condescending behaviour that creates the impression that women are weak and need to be rescued by men when undertaking work tasks. Benevolent sexism is akin to support for employment equity but lacks concrete plans for growth and upward mobility (Barreto & Doyle, 2023:104). A disadvantaged woman may receive ample praise for her work, but such praise does not translate into growth opportunities commensurate with it. Glick and Fiske (2018) reason that ambivalent sexism is analogous to "ambivalent racism" in that, in both cases, discrimination is automatic. Lizzio-Wilson et al. (2020) found that women's attitudes towards ambivalent sexism could not be universalised, as they were based on their own beliefs; in addition, some women endorsed peers who adhered to traditional gender roles and rejected those who deviated from them. Ambivalent sexism shapes decisions about the futures of

working women, capping their number in top executive leadership roles (Glick & Fiske, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2025).

Naidoo et al. (2025) surveyed 172 board members, C-suite executives, directors and senior managers of publicly listed companies in South Africa using the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory instrument to establish why women in leadership continued to be underrepresented in their company boards of management, despite gender diversity programmes that sought to align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) on gender equality. The study revealed that, ironically, both women and men exhibited benevolent sexism, thereby weakening efforts to foster gender parity in boardrooms (Naidoo et al., 2025). It was found that ambivalent sexism was a key obstacle to women's ascension into elite organisational roles. Benevolent sexism scores were highest in both women and men, particularly at top executive levels, with protective paternalism standing out. This was consistent with findings from previous global studies conducted during a period when hostile sexism was declining (Yarrow & Davies, 2024). Naidoo et al. (2025) found that women believed in distinct roles for women and men (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hanek, 2021; Hanek & Garcia, 2022). This study did not factor race as a unit of analysis, even though it noted disparities in elite positions by race and gender in the private sector; this is a knowledge gap. It is important to note that the African and Coloured women leaders' actions may be shaped by personal factors stemming from the adverse impact of ambivalent sexism and racism, as forms of prejudice, and having a knock-on effect on self-worth and wellbeing.

3.3.3 Work–life imbalance and motherhood penalty

Bisson, Grindstaff, Brazil-Cruz, and Barbu (2022) argue that leadership and subsequent institutional bias perpetuate inequalities through unfair policies and practices. The modern workplace purports to balance work and home life, yet work portfolios are gendered, racialised, class-based and gender binary (Acker, 1990; Neely, 2020; Ray, 2019). Professional work, or white-collar jobs, are often still framed around a White middle-class man who focuses solely on work, regardless of time expended, is handsomely rewarded, and is unencumbered by domestic work (Neely, 2020; Putnam, 2000). Similarly, Parashar (2014), Rajha and Ruiters (2025), and Syster et al. (2023) note that certain industries perceive women's unavailability during maternity leave or at night as incompatible with the demands of roles associated with traditional masculine strength. Such experience is termed the ideal worker norm, a conventional workplace practice that is themed around masculine work patterns that also make it impossible for women in general, and Women of Colour in particular, to break through and be visible (Bisson et al., 2022; Dashper et al., 2024; Eagly & Sczesny, 2019).

The profitability generated by such organisations sustains the work ethic of private companies, thereby increasing the disparity between female counterparts who must balance work and home, leading to stunted career growth (Becker, 1993). Excluded individuals must either change their circumstances to align with the team or leave, rather than companies making workplace adjustments to meet individuals where they are. Neely (2020) and Syster et al. (2023) note that the ideal worker norm hinders the accumulation of social and economic capital, thereby perpetuating gender inequalities.

Jaga et al. (2018) investigated the lived experiences of 19 Black African women leaders employed in private-sector organisations based in Cape Town, South Africa, regarding their management of work-life balance. All had at least one child; eleven were married, five were single, two were divorced, and one was widowed. At the time, Jaga et al. (2018) observed a deficiency of scholarly research on Black women's work-life experiences in the private sector following the advent of democracy. Participants struggled to break through in the White male-dominated sector; they encountered microaggressions and were constantly undermined or assumed to be in lower-level functions, as it was not expected of their ilk to hold university qualifications. Meanwhile, the Black professional women had discarded traditional roles in favour of education and financial independence, and yet they remained invisible (Jaga et al., 2018). The women in focus found that they were treated as tokens, merely to show that employment equity was implemented for reporting purposes. Participants found the culture hostile, felt discriminated against in pay, and were assumed to be inferior and treated accordingly, despite being qualified; some held Ivy League degrees and had international experience. Eighteen of the women had requested to work from home to care for their children while working. Such requests were refused on the grounds that childcare was a distraction from their duties. Workplaces lacked on-site childcare facilities, such as a creche, and/or breastfeeding facilities to accommodate working mothers, and the culture rewarded face time and long work hours. This group of women, in the main, were first-generation graduates who did not have relatives living in suburban areas near their workplaces; consequently, they resided in townships to facilitate convenient extended-family drop-off and pickup for their children. It was concluded that work-family dynamics were mostly informed by Global North, White middle-class women, Black women with differing geo-spatial arrangements and social class could not be accommodated and were constantly undermined.

Hofmeyr and Mzobe (2011) and Syster et al. (2023) acknowledge that Black women experience more hardships and endure a work-life double burden in the private sector. A different review of this case study notes that caregiving responsibilities are deeply entrenched among the professional women studied. Hofmeyr and Mzobe (2011) and Schmader and Block (2025) state that domestic and caregiving work is gendered, with roles delineated for women, while agentic, masculine roles are predominantly

occupied by men. They implicitly name this phenomenon “think care, think women”. Similarly, Coetzee and Moosa (2022) and Parmalee and Codd (2021) assert that, unlike men, single, married and widowed women leaders are expected to prioritise motherhood, home management, and being a partner and/or wife over private sector roles, thereby leading to women being overlooked for crucial appointments. In response, Barkhuizen et al. (2022) add that societal expectations regarding gender roles which are then diminish women leaders’ opportunities to advance to high-impact positions. Organisations do not exist in a vacuum; they are influenced by societal gendered roles about child-rearing roles, thus impeding the ascendance of African and Coloured women leaders to strategic leadership positions.

3.3.4 Thwarted by organisational hegemonic masculinity, culture and policies

Stereotypes are deeply ingrained and widely shared characteristics of the ideal worker and, as such, constitute significant constraints on women's access to senior leadership roles (Dashper, 2019; Peng, Zeng & Li, 2023). Many women leaders who qualify for elite roles face barriers such as the “old boys' network,” entrenched attitudes, and the glass ceiling, which lead them to abandon their career ambitions.

Stereotypes about women's leadership capabilities in South African organisations are a prevalent barrier to progression (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Dlamini, 2022; Zajiji et al., 2021). Rajha and Ruiters (2025) investigated a diverse cohort of senior male leaders in the South African private sector about implicit bias against women. Male participants revealed that the organisational culture and norms were designed to exclude women leaders. This confirms that leadership and gender in the workplace have historically been assumed to be inherently male, and that for women to be considered, they must be taught to adopt masculine norms (Bosch & Booysen, 2021; Ruiz-Castro & Holvino, 2016; Santiago & Bartesaghi, 2022). Consistent with these norms, women's ideas are often dismissed in meetings, only to receive approval when reiterated by their male counterparts, thereby validating male authority. Unearned credit being attributed to a male colleague is referred to as the “glass slipper” or the “Teflon effect” (Dashper, Gross & Xie, 2024). Occupational roles are structured around which roles are deemed fit for men, women, and People of Colour (Dashper et al., 2024; Gross & Xie, 2024).

Men and women experience the workplace differently. Thelma and Ngulube (2024) and April et al. (2007) identified structural barriers to equality, such as the glass ceiling effect, an invisible impediment to women's progression into senior leadership roles. The expression “glass ceiling” is used as a metaphor to describe a see-through barrier to executive leadership roles for women, particularly White women, as they progress to higher leadership echelons in the private sector (Coetzee & Moosa, 2022). Meanwhile, Black females, or to be precise African and Coloured females, are worse off, being

held back by an opaque “concrete ceiling” that is impenetrable and blocks access to career progression to senior and ultimately executive positions on account of systemic racism and gender bias, and the absence of key social networks (Dlamini, 2013; Ncube, 2018; Smith & Nkomo, 2021).

Furthermore, women leaders are at times assigned to precarious top leadership roles, where the likelihood of failure is high; this phenomenon is known as the “glass cliff” (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby & Bongiorno, 2011). The job opening is presented as an opportunity that an already top-level executive woman would be imprudent to pass up. However, it carries a high risk of failure due to the male leaders' inability to turn the company around (Bel, Sinclair & Vachhani, 2024; Eagly & Carli, 2018; Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Ryan et al., 2011). In her study of the glass cliff effect on South African women in top leadership positions, Mashele (2021) found that women failed, not because of incompetence, but due to the lack of support structures such as mentorship, social capital, and, in some instances, emulating masculine behaviour patterns, which diminished authenticity. Some women attribute their inability to reach senior roles to meritocratic reasons, citing personal capabilities as the basis for gender inequalities rather than structural discrimination (Lewis, 2017), while men claim success and internalise it (Dashper et al., 2024). This work suggests that women’s journeys meander, with twists and turns. Eagly and Carli (2018) summarise the complex obstacles women encounter in their work lives as the “labyrinth” of leadership. The authors assert that the hidden glass phenomena are sources of such barriers; the labyrinth redirects attention to men as creators.

In some quarters of the private sector workforce in South Africa, there are negative perceptions of Black women leaders in executive roles, with selection deemed unmerited and based solely on affirmative action to meet quotas, rather than on competence (April et al., 2007; Dlamini, 2013). Consequently, far fewer Black African women are appointed to senior leadership roles in the private sector, as they are often perceived as less competent (Dlamini, 2022; Matotoka & Odeku, 2021; Syster et al., 2023). McKinsey & LeanIn.Org (2025) found that 33% of women surveyed were concerned that their social identities would minimise their likelihood of advancement. According to Syster et al. (2023), in South African organisations, black women are more likely to experience workplace discrimination than White women. Ndida and Ndhlovu (2022) confirm that, in fact, Black African and Coloured women leaders bear the brunt of prejudice compared to their peers.

To explore barriers to the advancement of women leaders, Syster et al. (2023) interviewed 13 women and men from all racial groups in senior and top leadership roles across seven motor manufacturing companies in the South African private sector. Researchers identified only four women in senior leadership roles, confirming the sector's paucity in this area. Participants’ tenure in the industry

ranged from 13 to 36 years. It was revealed that discriminatory hiring, promotions, resistance to change and the perpetuation of the “old boys’ club” maintained the White male-dominant status quo within the industry. The industry's senior leadership roles were 70% male, with 46% White men and 16% non-White men. African, Coloured and Indian women collectively classified as black bore the brunt of prejudice. Findings revealed factors that hindered women's progression – masculine physicality in terms of work, discriminatory practices in hiring, White male dominance, a gendered culture and female stereotypes, with Black women deemed incapable, emotional and docile. It was expected that everyone would work long hours; roles were homosocial; maternity leave was a deterrent; equity hires were far fewer; and meetings and social events centred on activities preferred by men.

It was found that even though women in general were underrepresented in the higher echelons of leadership, White women fared better than the rest; they tended to undermine their counterparts, meting out the same prevailing masculine behaviours against them (Syster et al., 2023). African, Coloured and Indian (black) women were confronted by cultural biases that found expression in social, political, racial and ethnic lines, and they were seen as timid, emotional and incompetent. Tabassum and Nayak (2021) assert that toxic workplaces attribute incompetence to women rather than to insidious culture and practices. All participants confirmed that discrimination was the norm, and top leadership abused power with impunity. It was reported that the toxic environment led to a collapse in black women’s psychosocial wellness. Syster et al. (2023) concluded that black women experienced greater prejudice based on race, gender, class and social capital than men and, to some extent, White women; intersectionality was of the essence. Toxic masculinity and hostile organisational cultures impede black women from bringing their best selves to realise their full potential (Forbay & Mnguni, 2024; Syster et al., 2023).

According to Ncube (2018) and Ndida and Ndhlovu (2022), employment equity legislation predominantly benefited White women leaders, and they call for a review of beneficiaries. Pirtle (2023) and Stone and Erasmus (2012) are much more specific, suggesting that, in fact, affirmative action and/or EE criteria for redress should no longer be based on race, but instead on class, so that recipients, regardless of race, are prioritised according to social location and corresponding needs. This seems to be a sensible idea; however, the determinants of social class and the construction of accompanying assessment tools would need to be robust enough to ensure they do not preclude recognition of critical socioeconomic inequalities (Posel, 2014). Intersectionality, as an analytical tool, would clarify who is at the centre and whose voices are muted, and what is required for redress. The composition of 70% males in the sector, of whom 46% are White, is telling; women are at a disadvantage (Parashar, 2014; Syster et al, 2023). Some scholars argue that restorative legislation does not go far enough to redress

the harms experienced by women and People of Colour; alternative mechanisms are required (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022; Naidoo & Kongolo, 2004).

The bullying and microaggressions that Black women who work in the manufacturing sector are subjected to could have harmful psycho-social effects. According to Pillay, Flotman, and Mitonga-Monga (2019) and Sedikkides and Schlegel (2024), women may conceal their true feelings due to a lack of psychological safety. Mbatha (2025) found that African women leaders in South African industries often balanced speaking out against unfairness with toning down their voices to gain approval, and that navigating this balance was emotionally demanding. Faiz and Ozbilgin (2025) concur, stating that atypical professionals withhold their true feelings in alienating workplaces, where they are the only ones alienated, thereby compromising their well-being. Hoschild (1983) names this phenomenon the "managed heart" and/or "emotional labour". Emotional labour masks the true feelings of those at the receiving end (Faiz & Ozbilgin, 2025; Hoschild, 1983; Sedikides & Schlegel, 2024).

In the private sector, senior women executives face difficult choices that their male colleagues do not. It is argued that South African legislation, on paper, rejects gender stereotypes, but in practice, the White male serves as the standard of reference (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Dlamini, 2022; Zajiji et al., 2021). Women leaders could employ a range of strategies, including being assertive, seeking mentorship, and advocating to private-sector chief executives and human resources leaders to initiate a redefinition of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and how it will be measured. A double bind is often compared to or associated with a catch-22 situation, and is defined by the expression "Damned if you do, damned if you don't" (Catalyst, 2007; Cote, 2023). Women find themselves in a quandary in masculine workplaces. Bateson coined the term "double bind" to describe individuals facing an identity dilemma in family settings (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, 1963). The term came to mean different things; in human resources management (HRM) it was associated with the display of femininity while also exhibiting masculine traits at work (Bisson et al., 2022; Gosai, Jowett & Rhind, 2023; Visser, 2003). The double bind is a phenomenon in which women leaders face conflicting expectations about how to act to avoid being pigeonholed by gender stereotypes (Chikwe, Eneh & Akpuokwe, 2024; Eagly & Carli, 2018). They try hard to emulate their male counterparts, avoiding being seen as "less than" and, in other instances, acting more gently, re-gendering themselves (Boxer et al., 2017; Eagly & Carli, 2018). Acker (2009) maintains that workplace structures and policies, by design, still favour men; consequently, women's experiences are shaped using masculine constructions of gender. Women are doomed either way, and effective leadership models for diverse workplaces should be designed to facilitate meaningful employee engagement. A case in point is evidence of white

women leaders in the South African manufacturing sector who emulate androcentric models in dealing with peers (Syster et al., 2023).

According to Hirji (2021), the concept of a double bind is a simplistic account of the lived experiences of repressed individuals under strenuous circumstances; “oppressive double binds” aptly denote the consequences for this group. Such a dilemma is often intertwined with principles of moral good; irrespective of the choice made, the person making it is likely to be disparaged. Hirji (2021) argues that in some instances, making the difficult choice may benefit those who are subjugated, albeit at the expense of the representative. It can be inferred from the above assertions that the more severe the consequences of a decision, the more difficult they are to bear. It is important for women leaders to remain true to themselves and receive the professional development and guidance needed to navigate the corporate landscape without losing their authenticity; to that end, mentorship and coaching are discussed in the next paragraph.

3.3.5 Mentorship, sponsorship, coaching

Mentorship is a practice in which experienced leaders guide inexperienced protégés, facilitating their personal and professional development (Higgins & Kram, 2001; D’Este et al., 2025). Informal and formal mentorship programmes are key to enhancing protégés’ career paths and to understanding how work is done in workplace settings and beyond, thereby supporting career progression (Murphy, Gibson & Kram, 2024). Social networks drive informal mentorship programmes, whereas formal mentorship is part of development programmes, primarily for talent earmarked for succession (Booyse, 2007; Higgins & Kram, 2001). A formal mentorship programme could mediate in cases where mentees lack established networks. Some mentors go beyond the scripted mentoring programme and sponsor protégés by using their political networks and promoting protégés (Scheepers & Mahlangu, 2022). In a study conducted by McKinsey & LeanIn.org (2025) in the USA and Canada, 63% of employees with sponsors had been promoted in the previous two years, compared with 35% of those without sponsors. Women were less likely than men to have a sponsor who endorsed their readiness to advance to the next level of leadership (McKinsey & LeanIn.org, 2025).

In a local study of men and women who had mentored protégés, Phakeng (2022) found that the quality of mentorship depended on a structured programme, which included, but was not limited to, predetermined outcomes, a sound relationship between the mentor and the mentee, career support, role modelling and psychological support. Rogers (2025) explains that mentoring initially occurs organically during company functions; consequently, a segment of the workforce is left out, thereby reinforcing

gender and racial norms. Furthermore, Phakeng (2022) found that women protégés preferred male mentors because there were no known or observable women mentors.

In Scheepers and Mahlangu's (2022) study, 21 South African male executives from the financial services sector provided feedback on their experiences mentoring Black African women protégés in their industry to promote gender equality. Mentors comprised twelve African, two Coloured, one Indian, and six White leaders, occasioning cross-racial and cross-gender mentoring experiences. African women were selected for junior management roles to prepare them for senior leadership, as part of the private sector's contribution to the Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment and Employment Equity (B-BBEE) Act (Scheepers & Mahlangu, 2022). Structured formal mentoring yielded clear career pathways. Half the mentors had daughters, and their inclination towards gender transformation motivated them to mentor women; as a result, they were committed to supporting their protégés. A caveat of the approach was an inclination towards protective paternalism, which is likely to reinforce typical gender role stereotypes (Glick & Fiske, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2025; Scheepers & Mahlangu, 2025).

Some experiences were negative, with mentors reporting that their mentees were not taking accountability and were waiting to be told what to do, thereby creating a sense of dependency. It was also understood that some women's self-worth had been eroded; they second-guessed themselves, and in some instances rapport was absent. Cultural biases surfaced among the Black African males; they tended to be harsher on the protégés. Some mentors exhibited biases and stereotypes, expecting protégés to be warm and caring. In contrast, others perceived them as having exceeded expectations by doing well, even though they had expected them to fail. Most mentors reported that the women leaders they had mentored and sponsored progressed well in their careers, and one even left the bank to start her own enterprise. The Indian mentor observed that most of his mentees needed help with articulation; once they mastered it, they performed well. It was also observed that mentors assumed protégés had experiences similar to those of their White counterparts; mentors did not appreciate how intersecting multiple identities affected protégés (Crenshaw, 2018; Tshenyego, 2023).

The presence of women in leadership provides the next generation of leaders with role models and mentors who offer guidance. This bodes well for leadership talent pools, especially those drawn from invisible groups (Poma & Postoresi, 2014). Ngobeni, Swart and Lessing (2024) argue that in settings where women are in the minority and men dominate, mentorship is crucial for advancing gender equality. Studies demonstrate that networking and structured mentorship equip protégés with essential tools to succeed in their roles, develop social capital and remain in the talent pool for succession

(Rogers, 2025). Hofmeyr and Mzobe's (2011) findings on mentorship for African women concur with Phakeng's (2022) observation that women protégés prefer male mentors to female mentors. Mentees reported that men showed no biases, contrary to expectations regarding Black women protégés, while senior women mentors were unhelpful (Hofmeyr & Mzobe, 2011).

In some instances, women themselves block gender transformation; in this instance, it seems that senior women exhibited the queen bee syndrome. The term “queen bee” refers to women in executive roles who are either reluctant to promote other women or unhelpful to aspiring young women, for fear of losing their own positions (Staines, Tavis & Jayarathne, 1974). Baykal, Soyalt, and Yesil (2020) and Daspher (2019) argue that women working in male-dominated organisations tend to distance themselves from their own groups. Such a tendency is attributed to avoiding association with typical feminine stereotypes such as warmth, empathy, and kindness; instead, they act tough, decisive, and ambitious to fit in (Boxer, Jones & Cortes-Conde, 2017). Such women view being female as a shortcoming, leading them to become hostile to other women (Acker, 1990; Baykal et al., 2020; Daspher, 2019).

The novelty of Scheepers and Mahlangu's (2022) study lay in soliciting feedback from male mentors about their experiences mentoring women. The lessons learnt would have been enhanced if the same women had been asked about their mentorship journeys, which might have revealed their and their mentors' blind spots and areas for improvement. The following section examines the impact of social networks on women's career trajectories.

Booyesen (2007) argues that understanding identity markers is essential for empowering mentors to navigate protégés' cultural subtleties. McKinsey & Leanin.org (2025) found that women in mid-level positions were reluctant to disagree with authority or offer suggestions, for fear of making mistakes. Perhaps a pre-mentorship briefing could have clarified the impact of identity markers on self-worth, hesitancy, and a tendency to wait to be told, thereby addressing gaps in articulation and fostering awareness of how this group is measured against the standard of typical White women. Barkhuizen et al. (2022) and Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) support mentorship for previously disadvantaged women leaders as a means of advancing their career pathways. Hofmeyr and Mzobe (2011) go further, urging business leaders to prioritise Black women, an idea Booyesen (2007) considers unwarranted. Structured mentorship, career sponsorship, stretch assignments, and protégé rotations are highly recommended to provide exposure and access to influential networks, a needed intervention for previously disadvantaged women leaders in the private sector (Mthunzi, Yalazo & Proches, 2022). Forbay (2025), Forbay and Mnguni (2024), and Ncube (2018) found that Coloured women leaders in the private sector had fewer influential leaders who could recommend them to key figures for either stretch assignments or

promotions. Ribero and Arellano (2019) and Barkhuizen et al. (2022) advocate a feminist mentoring approach that acknowledges the context in which power and insubordination occur, thereby enabling women to share knowledge among themselves. An intersectional mentorship model remains underdeveloped. In the private sector, there is a need for a mentorship approach that facilitates the sharing of stories about women mentoring African and Coloured women leaders, given the South African socio-political context (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). The following section examines the personal and interpersonal factors that impede the progression of women leaders.

3.3.6 Imposter syndrome

For a considerable period, women have been their own obstacles to success, a phenomenon captured by the concept of “imposter syndrome”. Clance and Imes (1978) introduced the term impostor phenomenon, which describes women who doubt their abilities and perceive themselves as unworthy of the recognition they receive, even when they have excelled. Women who experience the phenomenon often regard the recognition they receive as undeserved, as they view themselves as deceitful. According to Clance and Imes (1978), women’s feelings of worthlessness lead them to overexert themselves because they fear being exposed as impostors. Rohrmann, Bechtoldt and Leonhardt (2016) confirm that imposter syndrome is more common among women than among men. The phenomenon is characterised by self-doubt, predisposition to depression, and frustration at being unable to meet self-limiting standards (Clance & Imes, 1978; Rohrmann et al., 2016). Imposter syndrome is a debilitating self-concept that hinders sufferers from appreciating their accomplishments.

The phenomenon originates in childhood messages about one’s intellectual abilities relative to siblings or others and persists into adulthood (Clance & Imes, 1978). Lumsden (2022) and Tulshyan and Burey (2021) counterargue that the impostor phenomenon is not attributable to women; rather, it stems from a culture that privileges White men over women and prevails at home, in society, and in workplaces. Thus, structural barriers are responsible for women’s low self-worth rather than choices made (Hoobler et al., 2018). Women attribute success to external factors, such as being lucky, while men credit themselves for their achievements. Society has low expectations for women’s roles, and men are viewed as more competent (Rohrmann et al., 2016). It is implicit that women are not born feeling less than others; the impostor phenomenon is socially constructed. Impostor syndrome, other defective self-concepts, and the subjection of African and Coloured women to constantly having to prove their worth at every level of leadership are some of the personal factors that impede their progress to strategic leadership.

3.3.7 Workplace ageism

Age plays a significant role in individual career pathways and subsequent progression to key leadership roles in the workplace (Super, 1980; 2020). Contemporary workplaces comprise a mix of younger and older employees, which at times leads to intergenerational conflicts over opportunities (Bae & Choi, 2023). Ageism is the discrimination against individuals or groups considered either too young or too old to benefit from development programmes, promotional opportunities, and/or other forms of recognition and rewards at work, regardless of their actual age (Bae & Choi, 2023; Swift, Abrahams & Lamont, 2022). Age as an identity marker in workplaces remains underexplored, yet it has the potential to foster meaningful intergenerational workplaces (Chang et al., 2020; Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019; Holman & Walker, 2021). Currently, young people seem to hold the view that they will never be like “them”, thus othering the older group (Johnson, 2013). In essence, younger employees tend to discriminate against their future selves, yet age is not a static social identity; if people live, each birthday brings them closer to old age.

McKinsey & The Leanin.Org (2024) study found that women in the United States and Canada under 30 were classified as part of the younger generation, whereas those aged 55 or older were classified as part of the older generation. Younger women felt their ideas were not heard, whereas older individuals with years of experience in the company were listened to when they offered a similar solution. Younger women also felt their roles were reduced to note-taking during meetings; they struggled to voice their frustrations. The study concluded that young women were the most vulnerable to ageism.

3.4 DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

Diversity has been one of the most popular business topics of the last two decades; it is also one of the most controversial and least understood (Anand & Winters, 2008; Herring & Henderson, 2014). In this section, the origins of diversity and inclusion and their development leading to the current state of practice and theoretical knowledge are discussed. In the United States, a 1980s study by the Hudson Institute, titled *Workforce 2000*, predicted that demographic trends would shift the composition toward women, minorities and immigrants (Anand & Winters, 2008; Johnston, 1987). It was forecast that by 2000 and 2020, women would continue to join the workforce in significant numbers, reaching 47% and 61%, respectively. This would lead to changes in gender policies to accommodate maternity and women with children (Johnston, 1987). Similarly, People of Colour would constitute a substantial share of entrants, with Black women comprising the largest proportion, in contrast to trends among White women.

The study brought a paradigm shift in future demographics and introduced workplace diversity (Anand & Winter, 2008; Roberson, 2006; Steinfield et al., 2019). Human resources management faced the dilemma of positioning transformation in a way that would make it palatable to dominant groups. Managing diversity as a business case proposition was adopted (Roberson, 2006; Anand & Winters, 2008; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). The ideological shift meant diverting attention from restorative justice for minorities and weakening the case for diversity (Adamson et al., 2021; Leslie, 2019; Nkomo, 2021; Tatli et al., 2012). In the early 1990s, South African organisations borrowed the concept of workplace diversity from the USA. When the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998 was introduced, the only difference was that it targeted the majority (Naidoo & Kongolo, 2004). In 2002, DeSimone, Werner and Harris conducted a second workforce demographic study, which forecast that by 2020, women in the United States would surpass their current 60% share, while African Americans, Hispanics and Asians would constitute 11%, 14% and 6%, respectively. Schafer (2010) argued that social prejudice and discrimination would persist regardless of the gender demographic shifts. Byrd and Scott (2024) propose that diversity practitioners reflect on the strengths and limitations of diversity management practices over the past 60 years.

Meanwhile, diversity had become an ambiguous concept, with the term itself invoking multiple meanings, thereby failing to eradicate discriminatory workplace practices (Frost & Kalman, 2016; Milliken, Martins & Morgan, 1998; Mbatha & Ruiters, 2025; Nkomo, 2021). The selected diversity categories were treated as fixed and unchangeable, ignoring context, the precariousness of inequalities, and the subtleties of power at work (Adesina et al., 2025; Holvino, 2010; Zanoni et al., 2010). As Tatli & Ozbilgin (2012) put it, workforce diversity employed an etic approach, treating categories as mutually exclusive, thereby ignoring their multiplicity and their intersections. Similarly, Liu (2018) and Lorde (1985) emphasise that additive and isolated analyses deradicalise and mask the experiences of oppressed women, as they become lost in compositional counts. The careers of African and Coloured women leaders are stymied at the middle management level, and current solutions have not ameliorated their situation. The simultaneity of race, gender, age, and social capital goes undetected, hindering the progress of the two groups.

3.4.1 Gender Diversity

On the other hand, programmes aimed at addressing women's succession treated them as a homogeneous group with similar lived experiences, thereby ignoring their varied individual realities (Adesina et al., 2025; Dennissen et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2019). Black women in the USA, for example, were victimised not only because they were Black or because they were women, but because they were both at once (Adesina et al., 2025; Beale, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 2011). Similarly,

within the South African business context, women's advancement remains uneven (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Blommaert et al., 2019; Parashar, 2014; Phaswana, 2021). The concept of diversity is based on isolated accounts and fails to address the marginalisation of African and Coloured women leaders, who face multiple concurrent identity markers (Espí et al., 2019; Forbay, 2025; Ncube, 2018). The concept renders these women invisible, while simultaneously increasing the advantages of their relatively privileged counterparts (Casale et al., 2021; Dlamini, 2022; Ndida & Okeke-Uzodike, 2012).

A longitudinal study by Terblanche et al. (2025), conducted from 2015 to 2019, examined the relationship between diverse board members and the corporate performance of 111 South African companies listed on the Johannesburg Securities Exchange (JSE), in line with the revised King Code IV on corporate governance. Under the new King Code, companies were required to include social categories such as age, gender, race and occupation. Terblanche et al. (2025) observed no significant increase in profitability when diversity was implemented in the new form; instead, financial performance declined. Nguyen, Ntim and Malagila (2020) contend that reluctance among Southern African listed entities to enforce race and gender targets might have been influenced by their dim view of new entrants, leading to a lack of board induction and a decline in business results. Moreover, Klettner, Clarke and Boersma (2016) maintain that if regulatory bodies are perceived to be overreaching their mandate to the point of interfering with organisational operations, resistance to diversity and gender quotas could de-prioritise gender diversity.

Consistent with this, Business Engage (2020) found that intransigence in implementing diversity initiatives in JSE-listed entities resulted in only 30% of entities reporting on their 2019 gender diversity targets. In the South African case, the findings run counter to the assertion that board diversity, and in particular gender representation at the said levels, tends to yield profitability (Bourke & Dillon, 2018; Hunt et al., 2018). Terblanche et al. (2025) conclude that diversity initiatives can be effective only when companies implement diversity not merely to comply, but in accordance with the letter and spirit of King Code IV. This assertion aligns with Naidoo et al. (2024) on the shortcomings of compliance-based diversity in South African businesses. Companies pay lip service to diversity initiatives aimed at transforming race and gender representation. McKinsey & LeanIn.org (2025) reports confirm that although 90% of companies surveyed said they were committed to diversity and inclusion, and that women's advancement was high on their transformation agendas, few had programmes for Women of Colour. The private sector has been saddled with the remnants of past race and gender inequalities; this means that far more than gender diversity is required – employment equity needs a broader set of measures (Adesina, 2025; April, 2021; Nkomo, 2021; Tripp, 2022).

On the other hand, Hoobler et al. (2018) caution that the essence of women's ability to run companies effectively may be lost when business cases for diversity, used to evaluate performance, are neither sufficiently explained nor adequately theorised. It appears that the number of women in leadership positions does not necessarily correlate with business performance; instead, company results improve when the socio-economic culture supports women and diverse teams (Hoobler et al., 2018). In such environments, boards with a proportionate share of women perform better. It must be noted that this study does not address the underrepresentation of women per se; rather, it examines the underrepresentation of African and Coloured women leaders relative to their EAP shares compared with their peers. Additionally, the study challenges the notion that diversity's sole function is to enhance corporate profitability rather than to redress systemic inequalities. Hoobler et al. (2018) argue that the persistent underrepresentation of women in the highest organisational tiers, such as chief executive officers or executive team members, may be attributable to the “think manager, think male” stereotype.

In 1993, Schein employed her 92-item Descriptive Index in studies conducted in the United States, Great Britain and the People's Republic of China (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy & Liu, 1996). It was concluded that sex typing was endorsed globally by most males across workplaces and by male university students, whereas female responses varied by country (Schein et al., 1996). Booysen and Nkomo (2010) examined the multiple effects of race and gender stereotyping among 560 White and Black managers in South Africa. Specifically, the two researchers investigated the extent to which a managerial position was perceived as male (i.e., held by a man) and whether the requisite attributes for success were viewed as more commonly held by men than by women. It was found that both Black and White men ascribed the managerial role to men, the “think manager, think male” phenomenon, and they accorded men more characteristics associated with success than they did women. Meanwhile, both Black and White women viewed men and women as equally suitable for managerial roles. Black women ascribed managerial characteristics more to females than to males, whereas Black males, across all groups of Black and White males and females, accorded the highest scores to males.

Managerial stereotypes in South Africa are informed by the male-dominated patriarchal society, in which married women were once considered minors requiring spousal permission to open bank accounts or seek employment (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Cerruti et al., 2020; Ncube, 2018; Ndida & Okeke-Uzodike, 2012; Zajiji et al., 2021). It seems that the “think manager, think male” stereotype cements gender discrimination and/or sexism emanating from structural inequalities rather than the competencies of women.

Zajjiji et al. (2021) point out that neither compositional count nor the benchmarked critical mass of women on boards addresses the deeply ingrained gendered norms in boards. In their invisibility vortex framework, women leaders are in the minority and therefore susceptible to being simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible. Depending on how they are judged, some women may be assimilated to avoid isolation and standing out. Terblanche et al. (2025) report that the Corporate Governance King Code 1V recommends that publicly listed South African companies consider race and gender diversity on their boards. At this point, this is a call for renewed efforts towards transformative change, the exertion of normative institutional pressure, and the nudging of industry captains toward their moral responsibility for restorative gender redress (Boxer et al., 2017; Terblanche et al., 2025). The impact of socio-historical factors and apartheid laws still holds sway regarding decisions about which women leaders are executive material. Consequently, African and Coloured women leaders are viewed less than (CEE, 2023, 2024).

3.4.2 Shortcomings of Diversity

Diversity initiatives have been criticised for tackling one aspect of diversity at a time, for example, gender or race, rather than addressing interlocking identity markers (Dennissen et al., 2020; Luiz & Terziev, 2024; Nkomo et al., 2019; Steinfield et al., 2019). Diversity encompasses everyone and includes primary and secondary forms, as well as visible and invisible characteristics (Byrd & Scotte, 2024). Daya and April (2021) also note that although the virtues of diversity are lauded in the workplace, women's ascension into senior roles in the South African manufacturing sector has been incremental. It can be inferred that there are mixed views on the effectiveness of diversity programmes in addressing systemic factors within South African corporations. A critical review of the meaning of diversity is urgent.

Houston et al. (2022) and Mestry and Schmidt (2014) corroborate this, emphasising that South Africa's history is complex and layered, necessitating approaches, models, and concepts that account for the unique local context. Similarly, Carim and Nkomo (2016) and Dlamini (2022) point out that the country's epochs include colonialism, followed by apartheid's social engineering and the democratic state. Compared with the environments studied thus far, disadvantaged groups constitute the majority in South Africa, with women accounting for 46,1% of the total (CEE, 2024). This suggests that new knowledge shaped by such unique factors may emerge. The diversity discourse is limited in its ability to address systems of penalty and privilege; an urgent framework is needed to identify how systems of domination are reinforced.

Nkomo and Hoobler (2014) reviewed the top five human resources management (HRM) journals and other recognised diversity journals on research topics published from 2000 to 2011. They found that 33 of the 115 articles reviewed (29%) focused on the value of diversity, while 26 (23%) explored the performance effects of diversity in teams and top management. They were surprised to discover that a sizable proportion (33, 29%) of scholars were already working on the concept of workplace inclusion, while others focused on the best way to manage a diverse workforce, emphasising human resources diversity policy. Nkomo and Hoobler (2014) observe that the epistemology of diversity research seems to lag behind ideology.

Diversity foregrounds key dimensions of difference and inequalities; however, on its own, it is ineffective in resolving inequities (Holman & Walker, 2021; Syster et al., 2023). Recent studies indicate that practising diversity and inclusion promotes gender transformation (Bisson et al., 2022; Bourke & Dillon, 2018; Shapiro, 2022). Scepticism about inclusion has surfaced, questioning whether inclusion is not rhetoric, a rebranding of diversity by another term, and to what extent it has changed practices in organisations to advance women in leadership (Adamson et al., 2021; Roberson, 2006; Tyler, 2019). It is crucial to define the attributes of inclusion, its meaning, and how it is practised for genuine workplace inclusion. The following section illuminates how inclusion is conceptualised.

3.5 DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

According to Shore et al. (2011), inclusion is the degree to which employees perceive that they are esteemed through feelings of belongingness, expression of uniqueness, and unfettered participation in the workplace, an observation that is aligned with other studies by Bisson et al. (2022) and Hunt et al. (2020) that link inclusion with valuing of difference. Ferdman and Yolin (2017) concur that inclusion is about valuing and embracing the diverse identities people possess, which are rooted in their unique backgrounds and experiences. Conversely, Adamson et al. (2021) and Tyler (2019) question the terms and conditions of inclusion, probing who grants insider status, what employees must forgo to be accepted, and whether all individuals even seek inclusion. Primarily, if inclusion is accepted, the question is, by whom and at what cost? In their latest research, Shore and Chung (2024) revised their theorisation of inclusion, thereby agreeing with Prasad (2023) that inclusion without investigating participants' intersecting identity markers was meaningless. Recent studies suggest that, unlike diversity, inclusion remains underdeveloped, with limited literature on it; hence, the need to clarify its determinants and theoretical underpinnings (Adamson et al., 2021; Hunt et al., 2020; Prasad, 2023). The existing literature suggests that the concept of inclusion as a means of achieving gender transformation yields inconclusive results.

When examining workplace bias, Mbatha (2025) found that, despite success in attracting talented Black African women leaders in corporate South Africa, diversity and inclusion efforts failed to address the biases and inequalities that hinder this group. Shapiro (2022) and Steinfield et al. (2019) conclude that diversity and inclusion initiatives have been ineffective in closing the gender gap.

The selected diversity categories are invariant, ignoring the context, the precariousness of inequalities, and the subtleties of power in the workplace (Holvino, 2010; Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2012; Zanoni et al., 2010). It can be inferred that diversity and inclusion approaches treat identities as mutually exclusive, examining race or gender without accounting for their interactions. Adesina et al. (2025) maintain that diversity and inclusion are crucial steps towards the goal of employment equity, but not the end in themselves, and April (2021) and Williams and Mikayla (2022) agree that to move the marginalised from the periphery to the centre of corporate decision-making, intersectionality is key.

In the following paragraphs, an appraisal of global and South African intersectional leadership literature is conducted, with particular focus on progress and/or the lack thereof in the private sector.

3.6 INTERSECTIONALITY – A TRAVELING THEORY

Intersectionality is regarded as the most significant theoretical contribution to gender scholarship (Acker, 2006; Esnard, 2025; McCall, 2005; Rodriguez, Nkomo & Rajendran, 2023). Intersectionality examines differences among women, highlighting inequalities within and across groups and identifying persistent patterns of power and subordination (Carbado et al., 2013; Collins, 2015, 2017; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989, 1990; Carasthesis, 2014; Tripp, 2023). Intersectionality in leadership studies is still evolving and has been taken up by scholars across disciplinary boundaries and geographic contexts, including the United States of America (Gopaldes, 2013; Richards & McKinzie, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Steinfield et al., 2019), Australia (Liu, 2018; Rhodes, Pullen & McEwen, 2023), Brazil (de Souza Possignolo, 2025), Canada (Adesina et al., 2025; Hankivsky, 2022; Sim & Bierama, 2025), Europe (Atewologun, 2018; Dennisen et al., 2020; Jibrin & Salem, 2015; Moorosi & Shownmi, 2025), Botswana (Tshenyego, 2023), South Africa (Dlamini, 2013; Forbay, 2025; Glapka, 2024; Mbatha, 2025; Mnguni & Dlamini, 2025), Zimbabwe (Ncube, 2018) and India (Sahoo & Lenka, 2024).

The foundations of intersectionality emanate from the United States of America, with Black American feminists, and it has traversed beyond women and gender scholarship to disciplines such as health, social science, law, education, business, geography, sport, and other studies (Adesina et al., 2025; Atewologun, 2018; Benschop et al., 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Desai, 2022; Matotoka & Okeke, 2021; Mbatha & Ruiters, 2025; Sowunmi, 2020; Wing, 1990). From a theoretical perspective,

intersectionality posits that multiple interwoven identity markers intersect, reinforcing one another and creating privilege and subordination (Crenshaw, 1989, 2018). From another perspective, Collins (1986, 1990) conceptualises intersectionality as the interlocking nature of oppression, in which social categories interlock to form a matrix of domination in which the salience of identities varies across contexts.

Beyond South African studies, almost all studies considered focus on race and gender, or on race, gender, and class (Moorosi et al., 2018; Sowunmi, 2020). Selected identity markers considered pertinent to enrich understanding of intersectionality have emerged (Collins, 2019a), including but not limited to age (Liu, 2018; Tshenyego, 2023), disability (Reygan et al., 2025), sexuality (Andersen & Collins, 2020; Grzanka, 2022), culture (Rhodes et al., 2023; Tshenyego, 2023), and territoriality (de Souza Possignolo, 2025). Methodologically, intersectionality supports the examination of intersections, focusing on outcomes and the structural realities that shape them, primarily through qualitative research, thereby revealing how privilege and disadvantage operate (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Analytical intersectionality involves understanding and interpreting the simultaneous production of interlocking identities, how these identities shape the lives of those affected, and how frameworks can be developed to address power dynamics (Rodriguez et al., 2024). It can be concluded that intersectionality has been applied globally and is also emerging in Africa, particularly in South Africa.

3.7 INTERSECTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Allison and Banerjee (2018) found that within organisations, only one per cent (1%) of articles used intersectionality as a lens. The intersection of identity categories at the micro, meso, and macro levels intensifies privilege or underprivilege, leading to distinct workplace experiences for women (Acker, 2009; Collins, 1990; Rodrigues et al., 2016; Ruiz et al., 2021).

It is worth noting that there are a few Black women in top executive roles within the private sector, which may give a false impression of representation (Forbay, 2025; Zajiji et al., 2021). However, it is generally the same women who circulate in board leadership roles and dominate media coverage. As Collins (1990) points out, this acceptance of a few “safe” outsiders masks the absence of the rest. D’Este et al. (2025) agree, maintaining that executive leadership tends to favour individuals with shared interests and backgrounds. Preferred women leaders exhibit elite social capital characteristics that influence their appointments to multiple boards, a phenomenon termed the “golden skirts” trend (Rigolini & Huse, 2021).

According to Rigolini and Huse (2021), publicly listed companies are under immense pressure to demonstrate genuine gender representation as proof of corporate citizenship and a reflection of their economically active population. Liu (2018) opines that the appointment of an elite group of women to boards individualises historical and professional barriers, yet the oppression of women was collectively felt, albeit with varying effects of intersecting identities. Klettner et al. (2016) and Sotola (2019) insist that repudiating a significant proportion of the untapped skill set of almost half of the country's working population makes neither moral nor economic sense. There is an opportunity for corporate South Africa to tap into more talented women leaders with experience and content. Sotola (2019) proposes that mandatory quotas be enforced in African countries, despite the minuscule pool of ready talent. Meanwhile, Mans-Kemp and Flanagan (2022) advocate for developing a board succession plan that considers identity markers in candidate selection. Furthermore, Mthunzi et al. (2022) recommend a structured board development programme that transitions Black professionals from non-executive roles to board-ready executive roles.

African and Coloured women leaders are at the lowest rungs of leadership; a different approach is needed. Neither the CEE report nor the gender frameworks applied an intersectional lens to analyse why the career trajectories of African and Coloured women leaders stalled at middle-level positions. The explicit objective of this study was to examine the effects of intersections on the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders in South African private sector organisations. Most intersectional leadership studies have been conducted in the Global North, thus overlooking the multifaceted South African context that adversely impacts the progression of marginalised groups (Barkhuizen et al., 2020; Carrim & Nkomo, 2016; Dlamini, 2013; Lewis, 2017; Mestry & Schmidt, 2014; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). The literature gap reveals an insufficient number of studies on African and Coloured women leaders in South African private-sector organisations that employ intersectional lenses.

Table 3.1 below summarises local intersectional leadership studies undertaken in South African private-sector organisations. This is followed by a section examining existing intersectional scholarship on multiple marginalised women leaders across various South African organisations.

Table 3.1 A summary of intersectional leadership studies in South African private sector organisations

Scholar(s)	Categories of difference	Key theories apart from intersectionality	Methodology	Consequences of intersections
Carrim (2021)	Gender, race, culture	Critical race, mentorship, intersectionality	Qualitative, interpretivism, 24 participants older than 40	Patriarchy, less than White, sexism values, female emancipation, race, gender, age, culture intersect
Dlamini (2013)	Race, gender, class	Wheel theoretical model, feminism	Grounded theory; 13 C-suite executives, private and public	High standards for Blacks, language and accents, no bearing to class, racism
Forbay (2025)	Race, gender, class	Colouredness, identity ambivalence, hidden work	Constructivist grounded theory	In-between-ness, Colourism, no C-suite sponsor
Hunter & Hachimi (2012)	Language, class, race	Language fluency, prestige	Mixed methods, qualitative, ethnographic	Language, whiteness, language hierarchy, classism
Jaga et al. (2018)	Race, gender, culture, work-life	Work-life, hidden work, race and gender stereotypes	19 women, phenomenology	Tokenism, invisibility, citizenship, assimilation, psycho-social health
Lewis (2017)	Race, gender	Construction of leadership	Mixed methods, case study	Meritocracy, women's self-doubt and racism against Blacks, contextual barriers

Table 3.1 A summary of intersectional leadership studies in South African private sector organisations continued

Scholar(s)	Categories of difference	Key theories apart from intersectionality	Methodology	Consequences of intersectionality
Luiz & Terziev (2024)	Race, gender, sexuality	Contextual identity work, fluidity of oppression	Pragmatism, non-binary, 18 interviews	Homo-prejudice vs gay friendly, fragility of inclusion, benevolent discrimination
Mbatha (2025)	Race, gender, class	Prove it again, bias, cognitive burden	Phenomenology, 25 Black women,	Atypical, class power, judged unfairly, misogynoir
Mbatha & Ruiters (2025)	Generated from data	Leadership development frameworks, culture	Qualitative, ATLAS.ti, analysis; 14 women	Motherhood, marriage penalty Sponsorship, ageism, body size
Ncube (2018)	Race, gender, class	Self-authorisation	Phenomenology	Invisibility, self-worth, EE benefits White females, objectification
Parashar (2014)	Race, place	Sex typing occupations, maternal incompatibility, and role theory	Digital three-digit data, public data sources	Wage differentials, motherhood penalty, gendered and racialised

3.7.1 Local intersectional leadership studies

In her doctoral study, Dlamini (2013) employed grounded theory to investigate the experiences of 13 women from diverse racial backgrounds who held senior leadership roles, specifically as chief executive officers (CEOs), across various sectors of the South African economy. The intersecting identity categories used were race, gender and class. At the time of the study, the chief executive officers under investigation were at least 50 years of age. Dlamini was pioneering the use of intersectionality in gender studies across South African state-owned entities and private sector organisations. She acknowledged that all women in her study suffered gender discrimination; however, White women had relational power, while Black women were also disadvantaged on account of race. She found that White and Black participants contributed more towards gender and race, respectively, and less towards social class, and that the government had provided an enabling environment for gender empowerment; however, the private sector had a long way to go. She suggested that future studies should incorporate language, generation and culture.

Participants in Dlamini's study were affirmed at a time when employment equity was still a novelty in South African workplaces and was applied stringently, notwithstanding the challenges they faced (Kongolo & Naidoo, 2004). Black participants held substantial cultural capital, having studied in international schools and universities and coming from upper-middle-class family backgrounds, albeit within Black communities. Such attributes affirmed this cohort's self-worth and sense of equality in the work at hand. Dlamini (2013) observed that the biggest beneficiaries of affirmative action were White and Indian women and Black men. When examining Black women as a group, the middle class had better access to privilege. It was found that race was the most discriminating factor, while other social categories were secondary (Booyesen et al., 2017; Dlamini, 2013). Black African and Coloured women were held to a higher standard than their counterparts; this exhibited colonial mindsets. Most women were already chief executive officers; therefore, they had immunity relative to lower-level positions. The relationality of White women and White men by virtue of race and culture placed them at an advantage, while Black women were at the lower rungs of leadership.

Lewis (2017) employed a case study methodology to examine subjective accounts of previously marginalised women and men in the South African private sector at the intersection of race and gender, focusing on how these accounts shaped the social construction of leadership in South African organisations. His research design included 60 leaders, who were White women and People of Colour, referring to South African, Indian, Coloured and African women and men, who occupied strategic and aspirational leadership roles in the South African private sector. He found that social identities were conflated with meritocracy, thereby stigmatising the promotion of women supported by affirmative

action. Women leaders reported experiencing self-doubt, which he attributed to both institutional and societal structures of inequality. In contrast, men did not experience any inadequacies that could limit their likelihood of promotion (Acker, 2006; Kumra, 2016). Lewis concluded that racialised beliefs about People of Colour's supposed inferiority for senior organisational roles continued into post-apartheid South Africa. People of Colour, especially women, felt compelled to demonstrate that they had been selected and promoted on merit. Meritocracy intersected with gender and race. Participants expressed an aversion to positive discrimination among People of Colour as a possible explanation for the adoption of unwanted interventionist policies. Lewis recommended that future research examine identity markers such as age, language, religion and culture. Research on women in leadership and on stagnant careers is relatively limited, creating a gap in understanding how social contexts influence women's leadership trajectories.

Ncube (2018) focused her inquiry on the multiple effects of race, gender, and class on the career advancement of 18 women in senior management and executive positions in corporations based in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Both Ncube (2018) and Dlamini (2013) found that affirmative action in South African workplaces benefited White women much more than African, Coloured and Indian women leaders. There was a case for reviewing beneficiaries of affirmative action in South African organisations (Ncube, 2018; Ndida & Okeke-Uzodike, 2012). Ncube (2018) further recommended that future gender studies theorise the identity of Colouredness in the workplace.

Jaga et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study of 19 Black African women leaders in professional practice in Cape Town, South Africa, who were a minority in their respective workplaces. The intersecting social categories examined were race, gender, and the effects of organisational culture on work-life balance. The researchers sought to uncover local experiences of work-life balance rather than to borrow frameworks from the Global North. It was found that participants experienced racial prejudice and gender discrimination and were affected by the changing roles of Black men. They found themselves in circumstances where the company culture and their male leaders considered caring for children or requesting to work from home to accommodate both work and family needs to be a deviation from expected professional conduct. Some women stopped asking and adjusted to the expected work norms to fit in. It was noted that, apart from enduring the persistent race and gender jeopardy, other intersections, such as patriarchy, social class and national origin, were also present.

Jaga et al. (2018) uncovered an androcentric culture that favoured gender inequality, consistent with the ideal worker and/or leader norm. Holgersson and Romani (2020) and Lewis (2021) confirm that such a culture privileges men, requires professional women to prioritise work, and casts those who

seek to balance work and life as failing to commit, notwithstanding policies and procedures that integrate both responsibilities. The women under study were tokens, assuming atypical roles in the workplace. Their insufficiency made them susceptible to hypervisibility and being discriminated against based on their race and gender (Newton, 2023). A lack of face time renders professional women ineligible for recognition, while those who yield are assimilated into the club (Acker, 1990).

Carrim's (2021) qualitative study examined the challenges that South African Indian women faced in career progression, including younger and older women in management roles in the private sector. Her paper explored the intersections of gender, race and culture, finding that Indian women were in the minority and were left to compete for attention with African women. Luiz and Terziev (2024) demonstrated the impact of intersecting axes and fluidity of oppression in the workplace by examining the intersectionality of race, gender and sexuality. The study adopted pragmatism as an interpretive framework, drawing on participants from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) middle-level leadership in the private sector in South Africa.

In a hermeneutic-phenomenological study of the lived experiences of Black African women leaders in South African corporations, it was found that this group's persistent underrepresentation in senior leadership was shaped by the intersection of class, race, gender identities and other processes (Mbatha, 2025). Furthermore, there is an insufficient number of studies that have examined their context in the corporate sector through an intersectional lens. Black African women were judged harshly, despite experiencing triple biases on account of race, gender and class, walking a tightrope and balancing assertiveness with likeability to avoid harsh punishment. They found coping strategies that imbued them with a sense of "ubuntu", positioning them as leaders who could promote an inclusive culture and spearhead change.

Forbay (2025) conducted a study across the public and private sectors of South Africa, employing constructivist grounded theory, with race, gender and social class as identity markers. In her findings, Forbay (2025) railed against the erasure of Coloured women leaders and their lack of executive-level sponsors who could advocate on their behalf. Coloured women leaders faced a dilemma regarding their hybrid identity.

Mbatha and Ruiters (2025) investigated factors influencing the ascendance of women leaders to senior leadership positions in the financial services sector. Ten Black African women held middle-level roles, two held senior roles, and one Indian and one White woman held middle-level roles. They found that organisational culture and practices, lack of sponsorship and family backgrounds hindered

progression to senior roles. In addition, the intersection of social categories and barriers, such as the motherhood penalty, blocked talent pipelines of middle management to senior leadership levels.

3.7.2 Analysis and discussion: Local intersectionality leadership studies

Most studies on leadership in South African private-sector organisations have centred race, gender and, to some degree, social class as identity markers for investigation (Dlamini, 2013; Forbay, 2025; Mbatha & Reuters, 2025; Ncube, 2018; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022). Anthias (2013) and Dhamoon (2011) maintain that this does not mean that intersectionality is confined to the commonly applied analytical levels; selection should be premised on the existence of inequality. According to Crenshaw (1989, 1991), intersectionality, like any other theory, responds to needs at a given point in time, including essential levels of analysis. Researchers have combined race, gender and class with other social categories. Two studies examined culture, and one probed sexuality. There is an under-theorisation of social capital as a social category in general and, more specifically, in private sector organisations, yet it is key to producing and reproducing material social connections that promote workplace visibility for recipients (Bourdieu, 2018; Claridge, 2020). The research designs employed varied; however, narrative inquiry was not used. Age as a social category for investigation is seldom explored in practice or in intersectionality studies (Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019). When applied, the focus is on ageism affecting older adults in the workplace (Makiwane et al., 2012; Tshenyego, 2023). However, intersectional studies that foreground intergenerational cohorts emphasise language, culture and racial identity (Glapka, 2024; Metcalfe, 2024).

Most local studies have examined intersecting social categories without considering the practices and contexts in which they intersected, thus overlooking the impact of contextual factors (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016; Dlamini, 2013; Makiwane et al., 2012; Ncube, 2018). Furthermore, the influence of multi-level contextual factors on women leaders' career progression has been examined (Neuman, 2007; Roberts, 2019). In this regard, Collins (2025), Liu (2018), Ruiz et al. (2021), and Steinfield et al. (2019) advocate probing the intersection of identity markers and their convergence with micro, meso and macro contexts to understand the depth of power structures and subordination in the workplace. Jibrin and Salem (2015) argue that overlooking disparities across different levels of social structures curtails the scope of intersectional analysis. However, Davis (2008) and McCall (2005) argue that conducting meso- and macro-level analyses undermines the credibility of lived experiences grounded in micro-level identity markers. Choo and Ferree (2010) and Jibrin and Salem (2015) offer a more balanced view, explaining that understanding the intersection of identity markers across multiple levels reflects the full complexity of organisational and societal structures and systems that sustain and exacerbate disparities. Forbay (2025) notes the effect of both institutional and social structures of

inequality on Coloured women's lack of sponsorship and subsequent muted voices in key decision-making structures, while Lewis (2017) observes the tendency of all women to doubt their abilities and Black women's aversion to affirmative action, opting for promotions on merit. Foregrounding only micro-level factors and overlooking contextual factors can capture individual realities of inequality but may miss systemic dynamics of power (Ger, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Steinfield et al., 2019).

It must be acknowledged that Crenshaw's (1989) coining of intersectionality and identifying intersections constituted a breakthrough in recognising multiply marginalised groups (Choo & Ferree, 2010; McCall, 2005). At the same time, it is key to engage with multilevel contexts and conjoint overlaps with identity markers to further reveal oppressive structures and societal factors, and to uncover emerging intersections that have not previously been considered (Gopaldas, 2013; Holvino, 2010; Rodriguez, Guenther, Nkomo & Mandiola, 2024). Collins (2015) and Steinfield et al. (2019) agree that dominant institutional structures, mostly led by White males, initially create marginalisation that gives rise to racism, sexism, ageism and elitism. It became imperative for this inquiry to consider interlocking identities derived from interpersonal relations, mechanisms of structured power in organisations, and socio-historical forces to understand how they shaped the lived experiences of equality and privilege among African and Coloured women leaders.

It is notable that some studies treat women in their samples as a homogeneous group, thereby selectively omitting the distinct effects of persistent racial hierarchy on gender transformation in the South African private sector (Carrim, 2021; Lewis, 2017). Collins (2015) asserts that silencing, erasure and relegation of certain perspectives are tantamount to epistemological violence and depoliticising intersectionality as a social justice tool. Two studies singled out Indian and Coloured women in leadership as groups (Carrim, 2021; Forbay, 2025; Forbay & Mnguni, 2024). Local intersectional studies have tended to focus on both Coloured men and women in the Western Cape community (Nilsson, 2016). Forbay (2025) laments the invisibility of Coloured women leaders in intersectional scholarly research, characterising this as epistemic violence. Dlamini (2013), Lewis (2017), and Ncube (2018) examined African, Coloured, Indian, and White women leaders; however, men also participated in some studies. Dlamini (2013) had an informant; Forbay (2025) interviewed five males; and Lewis (2017) interviewed Black males. According to Bowleg (2013), participants may be recruited to reflect diversity that might enhance research quality. Mbatha and Reuters (2025) sampled Africans and one person of Indian and White descent.

Jordan-Zachery (2007, 2013) argues that intersectionality is applied in various ways in research; what matters is that it measures what it purports to. All but the Lewis (2017) study employed inductive

qualitative methods; most conducted manual coding and thematic analysis, while three used ATLAS.ti software. Lewis's (2017) mixed-methods data from 60 participants were analysed in NVivo, which is typically used for large surveys.

Nash (2020) and Collins (1990) posit that intersectionality, and its reliance on Black women as the source of multiple subjectivities, render this group prototypical intersectional participants, whose lived experiences led to the formulation of intersectional theory. Crenshaw (1989) points out that intersectionality was intended for women who were excluded based on race and gender; they happened to be Black, and it is therefore sensible to prioritise them. So, Carbado et al. (2013) stress that the prominence of Black women's lived experiences in intersectional studies remains underexplored, and that, in any case, scholars from diverse backgrounds have studied intersectionality across diverse experiences and structures. In this instance, most studies investigating Black African women recognised nuances within and between groups and provided compelling justification for the choices made (Forbay, 2025; Ncube, 2018; Jaga et al., 2018; Mbata, 2025; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022). Ndida & Okeke-Uzodike (2012) ask: Which women? Scholars such as Houstin et al. (2022) advocate a review of employment equity (EE) recipients; in the same vein, Ncube (2018) and Ndida and Ndlovu (2022) observe that White women have benefited the most from employment equity based on race, human and social capital, while Black women rely on the strength of their human capital and doubling down on hard work to prevail. Similarly, McCluskey (2009) and Pirtle (2022) advocate reviewing affirmative action and/or employment equity selection criteria by replacing race-based criteria with a class-based system. Metcalfe (2024) and Stone and Erasmus (2012) go further, suggesting that racial classifications in South Africa be redefined to consider the first generation of racially mixed offspring and the elimination of identity ambiguity (Stone & Erasmus, 2012). The reclassification of those who require affirmation in South African workplaces is under review. This study's participants were both African and Coloured women at mid-, senior, and top leadership levels in the corporate sector.

Williams and O'Reilly (1998) found that most studies considered visible identity categories as important diversity markers when differentiating individuals. There is an array of identity markers. In this study, the categories of analysis were gender, race, and age, whose presence or absence is salient, and social capital, which is not readily detectable. Social capital refers to reciprocity arising from the quality of social networks one maintains, which can be leveraged to influence or enable the mobilisation of needed resources (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Bourdieu, 2018; Lin, 2008; Podolny & Baron, 1997). The selection of certain identity markers, such as race and gender, was influenced by the core provisions of the South African Employment Equity Act (EEA) of 1998. In contrast, age and social capital are addressed far less frequently, with age being almost entirely overlooked and social capital rarely

investigated. Only one local private sector study included age as an identity marker; none examined social capital. In this study, narrative inquiry was applied as a research strategy. To understand participants' lived experiences, this study employed contextual analysis through dialogue and storytelling.

Notably, some studies include 'intersectionality' in their titles yet provide no evidence of its application (Gouws, 2017; Ndida & Ndlhovu, 2022; Rhodes et al., 2023). Mnguni and Dlamini (2025) disapprove of the practice of naming intersectionality without supporting analyses. Other studies theorise inequalities using alternative frameworks, such as diversity. For future studies, intersectionality should be considered (Carrim, 2012; Syster et al., 2023). Two studies conducted in the private sector examined participants in semi-skilled occupational categories. Hunter and Hachimi (2012) employed mixed-methods research in a call centre in Durban, South Africa. They found that, although it was a low-paying function, it demanded eloquence in English, thereby foregrounding race, language, and class. Parashar (2014) examined sex-typed roles in a blue-collar work environment—the manufacturing sector—at the intersection of race and place. The environment was masculine and tougher on women, with maternal benefits and odd work hours incompatible with motherhood. Intersectional leadership studies that focus solely on the South African private sector as an intersectional domain are scarce, yet it is the largest employer relative to the public sector and not-for-profit organisations, making it a rich site for intersectionality (CEE, 2023, 2024; Stats SA, 2024). The intersectional lens gives voice to those who are suppressed, moving them from the margins to the centre (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022).

3.8 IDENTITY MARKERS UNDER FOCUS

This segment foregrounds the intersecting social categories examined in this study, being race, gender, age, and social capital.

3.8.1 Race

The history of race relations in South African workplaces is steeped in the apartheid divide-and-rule practice, which normalised racialisation. Posel (2001) and Terreblanche (2002) assert that in South Africa, socio-economic and political structures were race-based and class-linked. Racial hierarchy and proximity to White upper-class lifestyles determined one's status and subsequent acceptance into the purportedly superior race (Hesse-Biber & Barko, 2008; Houston et al., 2022). Bailey (1998) maintains that the power of racial classification is located in the group that accords who is White and who is “non-

White”. South Africans saw themselves through the lens of markers imposed by the White nationalist government (Du Bois & Marable, 2015; Manganyi, 2018; Tewolde, 2024).

In South Africa, people of European descent were highly regarded, Coloured people were in the middle, and indigenous Africans were at the bottom of the racial hierarchy (Casale et al., 2021; Espi et al., 2019; Terreblance, 2014). Later, the Indian group were assigned the second level after the White group (Carrim, 2021; Terreblanche, 2002). Determinants of racial categories were socially and politically formed, and were based on physical appearance, hair texture, skin pigmentation, opinion of social class, ability to speak either English or Afrikaans, and other arbitrary categories (Forbay, 2025; Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2021; Posel, 2001; Tewolde, 2024). Discretionary judgment included the arbitrary hair pencil test as an instrument of racial classification for people whose appearance was deemed rugged (Salter, Adams & Perez, 2018). The pencil would be pushed through individuals’ hair to determine their identity; if it slid easily, they were classified as White, thereby moving into the highest racial hierarchy; if it remained lodged in the hair, they were considered Coloured (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2021; Posel, 2011; Power, 2009).

As Salter et al. (2018) put it, racism may be understood as the intersection of personal, organisational, societal and cultural practices rooted in history that perpetuates and maintains race-based superiority hierarchies. Coloured people are sometimes caught in a bind between how they identify and how they are classified in the workplace, despite the EE combining the three groups into one, namely, “Black”. Mixed-race groups or Coloured people find themselves in an “insider”/“outsider” quandary stemming from their proximity to either the White or Black race, based on phenotypes, upbringing and mannerisms (Hesse-Biber & Barko, 2008).

Some Coloured South Africans took a neutral stance on racial identity, proclaiming to be colour blind, a belief that race should not matter (Neville, Lilly, Lee, Duran & Browne, 2000). Colour blindness is a denial of the harsh effects of racism on marginalised groups in unequal societies (Atkins, 2019). Although race was determined through arbitrary distinctions and reinforced through apartheid legislation, its effects are still strongly felt in South African workplaces (Manganyi, 2018; Phaswana, 2021; Posel, 2014). Race remains a contentious issue, not because of population size, but rather because the dominant group, the White minority, holds power in private sector institutions. In the next section, gender and genderism as identity markers are reviewed.

3.8.2 Gender

Zanoni et al. (2010) describe the beginnings of disparities within organisations as being associated with women and Black people. Gender refers to social attributes associated with being male or female; this definition is binary and essentialist (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Bendl, 2009; Calas & Smircich, 1989). Recognition of gender and non-gender identities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals who experience gender identity as neither male nor female, has been increasing (Luiz & Terziev, 2022).

Several studies have revealed that Black women are held to different and higher standards than White women and leaders of other racial groups (Dlamini, 2013; Prewitt, 2024). In her study of 25 senior Black women across various South African industries, Mbatha (2024) established that a common theme among them was striving for excellence to overcome stereotypes and to demonstrate to their leaders, peers and fellow women that they were worthy of the roles assigned to them. Tshenyego (2023) found evidence of the same pressure exerted on Black women to consistently outperform, as they were anxious about how they would be evaluated and thus remained vigilant about their performance. It seems that Black women can turn trauma into resilient strategies in pursuit of their goals. Moorosi, Fuller, and Reilly (2018) found that Black women's constructions of success were shaped by barriers posed by their racialised and gendered histories in attaining leadership positions.

In some instances, workplaces create gendered symbols that determine acceptance and fit, such as body images, phenotypes and hair texture, as well as interests outside work, to assess the preferred representation of women in the workplace (Hoobler et al., 2018; Owens, 2006). According to Prasad (2023) and Walton and Truong (2023), such gendered symbols may create a sense of belonging and acceptance among the dominant group, yet this is conditional. Relatedly, Tshenyego (2023) found that such a phenomenon might lead “othered” groups to believe they had achieved insider status, even though they were not recognised as true insiders within the aspirational group. In sum, the ambiguous status of belonging is often referred to as the model minority (Prasad, 2023).

Du Bois and Marable (2015) further developed the concept of belonging, stating that People of Colour had often been in a state of liminality between blackness and whiteness. In South Africa, some members of the Coloured group describe their identity ambiguity as “Not white enough, not black enough” (Adhikari, 2004; Erasmus, 2001; Forbay, 2025; Pirtle, 2023).

3.8.3 Age

Contemporary workplaces comprise a mix of younger and older employees, which at times leads to intergenerational conflicts over opportunities (Bae & Choi, 2023; Ye & North, 2024). According to

Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008), research that investigates the intersection of age and gender is scarce. Ageism in the workplace is discrimination against individuals on the basis of chronological age (Bae & Choi, 2023; Francioli & North, 2021; Swift, Abrahams & Lamont, 2022). In most instances, it is directed at older adults (Ye & North, 2024). It is reported that older employees feel that, with respect to career progression and development opportunities, senior leadership prefers the younger generation to them, due to age stereotypes (Francioli & North, 2021; Perron, 2018). It seems that the workplace is a site for intergenerational tensions.

Francioli and North (2021) postulate that discrimination against older adults is attributable to three perceptions: a lack of adaptability, higher placement and retention costs, and lower performance due to reduced motivation and energy. Blake and Davis (1964) posited that prevailing age norms at the time prescribed age-appropriate behaviours, none of which differentiated between genders. In a survey of at least 1000 employees from a large UK financial services institution, women who were older than 40 reported having experienced age-related discrimination more than employees of any other age or gender group. A similar survey of American employees aged 45–74 revealed that 64% of women believed that people faced age discrimination at work, five percentage points higher than men in the same age range (Perron, 2018). This study suggests that age and gender may intersect and exacerbate each other, resulting in ageism among women aged 40 and older. It is likely that in instances where such women are already multiply marginalised, for example, in terms of race, they will be disadvantaged not only because of age, but also because they are women. The compounding effect of race means that they are subject to prejudice, because they are older women who also happen to be People of Colour (Calasanti & King, 2015). Francioli and North (2021) and Wilks and Neto (2013) theorise that there is gendered ageism in the workplace, where older women experience what they term “lookism” bias that their male contemporaries and younger women are not subjected to.

Social role theories have identified barriers to women leaders’ career progression, such as gender stereotypes, hegemonic masculinities, and work-life balance (Koenig & Eagly, 2019). Such factors might also affect this group (Ye & North, 2024; Francioli & North, 2021; Wilks & Neto, 2013). Women perceived as old may be prone to such barriers. Younger professionals exhibit a stronger sense of agency in advancing their careers than previous generations, whereas older professionals caution against haste (Bae & Choi, 2022). Mbatha & Ruiters (2025) found that younger women in South Africa's financial services sector felt excluded from leadership pipelines because they appeared and sounded too young to be considered for senior roles. Moderating factors, such as relevant qualifications, financial services experience and skill sets, did not mitigate the bias. Jonson (2013) argues that young people often hold the view that they will never be like “them”, thereby othering the older group. Age is not static; as

people live, each birthday marks a transition to old age. Age as a social category in workplaces remains underexplored (Chang et al., 2020; Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019; Holman & Walker, 2021). Based on the studies cited, it can be concluded that older adults, particularly women, face workplace obstacles (Francioli & North, 2021; Wilks & Neto, 2013).

3.8.4 Social capital, social networks

Social capital is defined as resources and/or benefits derived from reciprocal relationships that can be accessed when required (Lin, 2001). According to Bourdieu (2018), the ability to navigate social or cultural situations depends on individuals' capacity to intuitively understand the rules and expectations of a particular context, informed by their embodied cultural and social dispositions. In essence, social capital is generated through relationships in which players cultivate ties to get by and/or get ahead in the workplace and other spheres of life, such as family settings, social clubs, business, and academic institutions (Claridge, 2018; Putnam, 2000; Tindall et al., 2024). Shared narratives within the inner circle sustain social networks; however, the opposite effect of such bonding is the reinforcement of discrimination against outsiders (Claridge, 2020; Rogers, 2025). Structural barriers are differentially permeable depending on intersecting social positions (De Vries, 2015:23). Rodrigues et al. (2016) and Wilson, White, Jefferson, and Danis (2019) demonstrate that individuals hold multiple identities, particularly along social class, education, and race, highlighting structural issues. Rigolini and Huse (2021) list elite identities that enable social capital, including family background, prestigious education, and political, social, intellectual, and corporate elites.

Bourdieu (2018) and Putnam (2000), when exploring different aspects of social capital, find that it plays a significant role in perpetuating social disparities, yet it could also be used to dismantle these boundaries and bring those at the periphery to the centre by connecting them with influential decision-makers and expanding access to resources and opportunities. McDonald et al. (2024) confirm four types of social capital: the flow of information, influencing, decision-making processes, and social credibility. Likewise, Tindall et al. (2024) find that strong social ties based on reciprocity enable all network members to access resources. According to Bosch (2025), D'Este et al. (2025), and Rigolini and Huse (2021), there is a need for a critical mass of women in senior and top leadership roles in South African executive boardrooms to ensure a collective voice for women and a sense of sisterhood. Zajiji et al. (2021) disagree, arguing that the number of women on boards does not necessarily resolve deep-seated political undercurrents that leave women feeling isolated and incompetent.

In a longitudinal study conducted by Blommaert et al. (2020) on the reasons why women were underrepresented in positions of authority compared to men, it was found that the gender gap was

mediated by knowing an influential leader in a company; 56% of men compared to 45% of women were likely to see a company executive or a senior leader. Blommaert et al. (2020) found that due to women's lack of diverse social networks and/or their lower likelihood of knowing influential networks in prestigious positions, they were inclined to hold lower-status positions than men. Madaan and Pradhan (2017) concur that barriers to women's upward mobility may be attributed to limited informal networks, a lack of executive sponsors and mentors, and deficient gender-sensitive employer policies. In a business case for women leaders, Hoobler et al. (2018) revealed that women leaders' competence was subjected to more rigorous scrutiny than men's; without reinforcement in precarious roles, they could not compete on an equal footing and would crash under pressure.

Singh, Point, Moulin and Davila (2015) studied the profiles of 115 women on the boards of top publicly listed French companies. They gathered numerical and biographical data on women on boards and concluded that appointments were based on prominent family ties to the family of origin, likely founders of the company; Ivy League academic credentials; elite government connections; and securing appointments.

In South Africa, Black women in the private sector face barriers to building networks; they may possess the skills but lack the social capital to connect with influential leaders (April et al., 2007; Ndida & Ukeke, 2012; Scheepers & Mahlangu, 2025). Proximity to senior leaders puts one “front of mind” and increases the likelihood of promotion. Social exclusion of women occurs when strategic planning and team-building sessions are held off-site, such as during golf outings, a sport typically preferred by men (D’Este et al., 2025; Rigolini & Huse, 2021). Such subtle exclusions reduce the visibility and interaction of Black women with key decision-makers (Scheepers & Mahlangu, 2025). This study examines the intersection of social capital with race, gender, and age to determine their simultaneous effect on the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders in South African private-sector organisations.

3.9 TOWARDS INCLUSIVE GENDER TRANSFORMATION

“Women of colour (WOC) have been theoretically erased in organisational leadership development”
(Sims, 2022:169).

Numerous studies have proposed strategies for South African private-sector organisations. Perhaps organisations choose to ignore these strategies, or the strategies proposed by women leaders themselves are simplistic. Additionally, diversity and inclusion rhetoric in South African organisations suffers from the same limitations highlighted by numerous scholars earlier in this chapter. This chapter provided a comprehensive analysis of diversity and found it to be insufficient (Adamson et al., 2021; Shapiro, 2020). At least thirty years on, the weight of the apartheid race and gender hierarchy continues

to block the attainment of truly inclusive workplaces (CEE, 2024; Le Roux & Udeyemi, 2021; Phaswana, 2021). Figure 5.1, titled "Some blacks are more equal," supports this assertion. Applying an intersectional lens is urgent. The following considerations pertain to strategies that could be developed to advance gender transformation, covering aspirant women in leadership, private-sector organisations, and policymakers, to answer the fourth sub-research question (SQ4) on the accomplishment of gender transformation in the private sector.

3.9.1 Women in leadership (personal)

It is proposed that women under study, preferably from frontline to senior leadership roles, should be invited as individuals and involved in focus groups to share the lived experiences that shape their careers, using relevant identity markers (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989; Sanghvi et al., 2019; Soudien, 2021). The outcomes of such a study are likely to reveal advantages and disadvantages that single-axis frameworks may have obscured. This could result in proposed individualised career pathways with self-selected professional coaches and mentors who provide informed guidance and sponsorship (Blommaert et al., 2020; Ndida & Okeke-Uzodike, 2012). Allowing marginalised people to speak for themselves could help leadership understand them as individuals and the values they represent (Collins, 1990; Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). Women should be enrolled in leadership development programmes that tackle internalised inadequacies and be involved in selecting professional coaches and mentors to ensure a good fit.

3.9.2 Organisational policies and practices

Eliminating the persistent subordination of African and Coloured women in the workplace requires bold consciousness-raising steps to meaningfully redress workplace inequalities by granting this group the power to produce knowledge through intersectionality (Abets & Moore, 2018; Crenshaw, 1989; Soudien, 2024). Personalised development programmes for women should incorporate social aspects, such as networking opportunities and structured mentorship programmes tailored to each leadership rank, aligning with the demands of each level and preparing for the next.

Mentorship and sponsorship programmes should be embedded within these programmes to support and introduce women to influential leaders, thereby equipping them to navigate corporate dynamics (Rajha & Ruiters, 2025; Scheepers & Mahlangu, 2025). Criteria for advancement to the top should be explicit and transparent, so that African and Coloured women leaders are aware of what is required and can align their development with organisational time frames (Rajha & Ruiters, 2025). The intersectional lens is a multipurpose tool for examining the lived experiences of diverse groups (hooks, 1989). In this instance, priority should be given to the underrepresented demographics. Examining the

interplay between identity markers and contextual factors, such as country dynamics and emerging social categories, can enhance policy implementation (Hankivsky, 2022; Grzanka, 2022). It is vital for boards of directors, executive leadership, and human resources practitioners not only to comply with the principles of gender transformation but also to adopt the spirit and letter of the Employment Equity Act (CEE, 2023).

3.9.3 Policy makers

From a macro perspective, policy makers, such as the Department of Labour, should draw out empirical data and analysis of EE trends from the 1st to the 25th Commission for Employment Equity reports, as evidence of progress and/or regression and subsequent levels of commitment to the cause of advancing every employee/citizen of South Africa. Such data would be factual, free of rhetoric, and justify the rationale for and the importance of redress. The CEE commissioner should oblige the corporate sector to close inequality gaps, guided by an intersectional lens.

Organisational succession mechanisms aligned with the EAP should be ratified by recognised industry professional bodies and approved by the Minister of Labour and Employment. These mechanisms should be incorporated into annual EEA reports, along with tangible goals and timeframes to narrow the gap in senior and top leadership roles for Black African and Coloured women over a maximum of five successive years. Exemplar company strategies for a cohesive society, from which the women in the leadership talent pool are drawn, should be recognised and shared.

Intersectionality theory and methods should be integrated into the human resources management curriculum of institutions of higher learning, as diversity and inclusion have been (Allsion & Banerjee, 2018; Holvino, 2008; Steinfield et al., 2019). The goal of intersectionality should be to facilitate the inclusion of marginalised groups about whom it can be said, “when they enter, we all enter” (Crenshaw, 1989:167). These are due to the interlocking axes of domination and subordination. At a policy level, the Employment Equity Act (EEA) treats women as a homogenous group (Forbay, 2025).

3.10 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented an overview of current global and local empirical data on the state of women in leadership across all sectors, particularly in the private sector. Drawing on the existing literature, social role theory, and related derivative theories, this paper discusses in depth the barriers that women in leadership face in their career trajectories. A review of diversity and inclusion as a solution to the emancipation of marginalised women found that it falls short of empowering multiply marginalised women leaders. Intersectional leadership provided compelling arguments as an analytical lens. Proposed gender transformation strategies for the private sector are shared. The next chapter

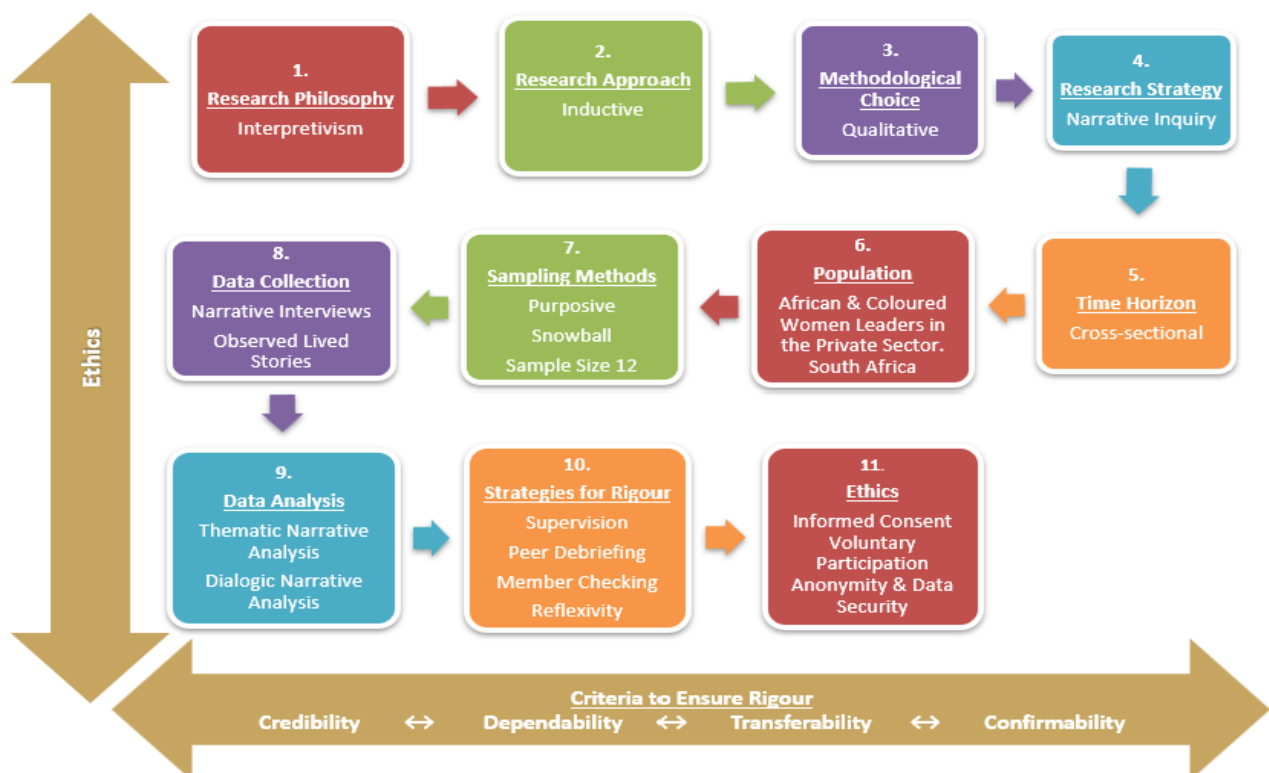
presents the research design, which aimed to give voice to African and Coloured women leaders in private sector companies and to determine the most effective way to advance this cohort.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Research is a structured enquiry into a problem, undertaken through systematic investigation to either produce original knowledge or apply existing knowledge in new ways, thereby creating new understandings (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). This chapter introduces the methodological approach that supported the current study. The study's philosophical underpinnings are presented, followed by the research approach and the methodological choice. The research strategy and the methods used to collect and analyse the data are then discussed in detail. Finally, evidence is provided of rigour and the ethical considerations observed. Under each section, there is a brief theoretical discussion and confirmation of how the corresponding research elements were applied. In this study, participant demographics are abbreviated as follows: Black African (A) and Coloured (C), and leadership levels as middle (M), senior (S), and top (T). All methodological choices are justified. The overall structure of the study is depicted in Figure 4.1 below.

Figure 4.1: Research process: An overview



Source: Adapted from Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019)

4.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

A research philosophy, otherwise termed a paradigm, is the framework on which research is built (Creswell, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Saunders et al., 2019). It is informed by the researcher's beliefs, experiences and understanding of the world, and by how knowledge is produced to enlighten society (Cresswell, 2014; Saunders et al., 2019; Tracy, 2019). The primary research philosophies that guide research approaches are positivism, pragmatism, interpretivism, and critical realism (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The philosophical choice should be consistent with how data will be collected and analysed (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Interpretivism is the philosophy in which this study was situated. Interpretivism recognises that reality may be understood through the frame of reference of the African and Coloured women leaders within the private sector, as they have personal experience of the phenomenon under study (Marshall, Rossman & Blanco, 2022; Polkinghorne & Given, 2021).

This study explored the lived experiences of African and Coloured Women leaders in South African private sector organisations, using intersectionality as a conceptual framework. Intersectionality studies conducted in First World countries are unlikely to adequately reflect the experiences and views of women leaders in South Africa (SA). This study gave voice to muted women leaders in the private sector of SA, who were underrepresented at senior and top leadership positions and consequently missing in strategic discourse.

Interpretivism is concerned with the personal assessments participants make as they explain the varied experiences they encounter in their social worlds at work and in their daily lives (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tracy, 2019). Beneath the interpretivist paradigm are beliefs through which people view the world, namely, ontological, epistemological, methodological, axiological and rhetorical (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Saunders et al., 2019). Researchers hold specific viewpoints on each assumption, which influence the research design (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Guba & Lincoln, 2011; Tracy, 2019).

From an interpretivist ontology and epistemology stance, neither reality nor knowledge is “out there”; both are socially constructed through interactions with participants (Bruner, 1991; Clandinin, 2006; Creswell, 2014; Esin, 2011). My ontological position was based on the women leaders’ subjective realities, which gave me insights into factors they considered as either enabling or blocking upward mobility, while epistemologically, their absence in senior and top leadership positions can only be legitimate and understood when it is grounded in their own lived experiences (Krause, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During fieldwork, participants' workplace experiences were discussed, each from a distinct perspective, reflecting multiple levels of context. One participant remarked:

I was the only developer of Colour. There were times I was excluded... I saw discrimination, but I did not see it. Did it make me feel bad? Yes, it did, but I still never saw it. I was set on winning... I needed to succeed. I was appointed as a <function> Lead, but once you are there, people change... I did feel it was personal. I never got the sense that it was because I was a woman; many times, I thought it was because of my Colour... I recall that on the third day, they introduced me to the managers who would report to me, all of whom were White. One guy said, ' At least, she speaks Afrikaans '. Then I knew I had my work cut out for me.

Verona (CT)

Verona understood her experience through the lens of race; meanwhile, Buhle's was through both the race and gender lenses. Her work was criticised at every turn:

At Exco... they would rather have Indian and Coloured... because they shall be able to converse in Afrikaans, because, as an African person, I will say, I do not know how to speak Afrikaans.

Buhle (AS)

Different narratives reflected the unique realities of the participants and, as such, each had its own truth. Spending time in conversation with participants and observing them in the field enabled me to become a co-creator of their narratives, uncovering their everyday experiences in various workplaces alongside them. According to axiological assumptions in research, the process is value-laden, such that the researcher's standpoint cannot be separated from it (Marshall et al., 2022; Tracy, 2019). Creswell and Poth (2016) and Saunders et al. (2019) state that, in the interpretivist paradigm, individual value systems are recognised and respected.

I acknowledge that my interest in this study was impelled by the Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) report (CEE, 2023, 2024), which covered trends from 2019 to the first quarter of 2025. The report revealed that African and Coloured women leaders were positioned at the margins of private-sector ascendancy and remained at middle-management levels. My identity as an African woman leader who advanced from middle to executive-level positions across various South African private sector organisations positioned me within the group under study. Inevitably, my personal values shaped and influenced the choice of topic, the formulation of the research questions, and the collection and analysis of participant data. I recall listening to Mmabatho narrating her lived experiences in the workplace:

To be included as a Black female in a White male-dominated space is difficult. The culture is hostile; you are not included; it is an exclusive men's club. I never had a sponsor. I am not included in events, I hear about them... Issuing of <tools of trade> is discriminatory, even though you are paying the same tax. Blacks often receive lower-status vehicles and lower allowances, whereas another race group may receive a full tank. Once you become assertive, it hurts your career... they exclude you.

Mmabatho (AM)

I noticed Mmabatho's sadness and sense of resignation. She required constant reassurance regarding her answers and doubted her own account. Instinctively, I fell back on my values. I had a debriefing session with my supervisor about my feelings. I journalised my thoughts and contextualised my feelings; this settled the matter for me.

The rhetorical assumption is manifested in the conversational style used in this thesis and in the occasional use of the pronoun "I" (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Firestone, 1987; Polkinghorne & Given, 2021). As such, the style facilitated the telling of participants' stories. The methodological assumption concerns the research strategy employed and aligns with data collection and analysis (Tracy, 2019). As shown in the chapter, narrative inquiry, along with related data-collection and analysis methods, provided an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and foregrounded their voices.

The assumptions of the interpretivist paradigm aligned with the purpose of this study, which was to investigate the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders to understand the causes of plateauing in middle leadership and underrepresentation at senior and executive levels. The research paradigm acknowledged that the intersectional subjectivities of African and Coloured women leaders produced multiple individual experiences.

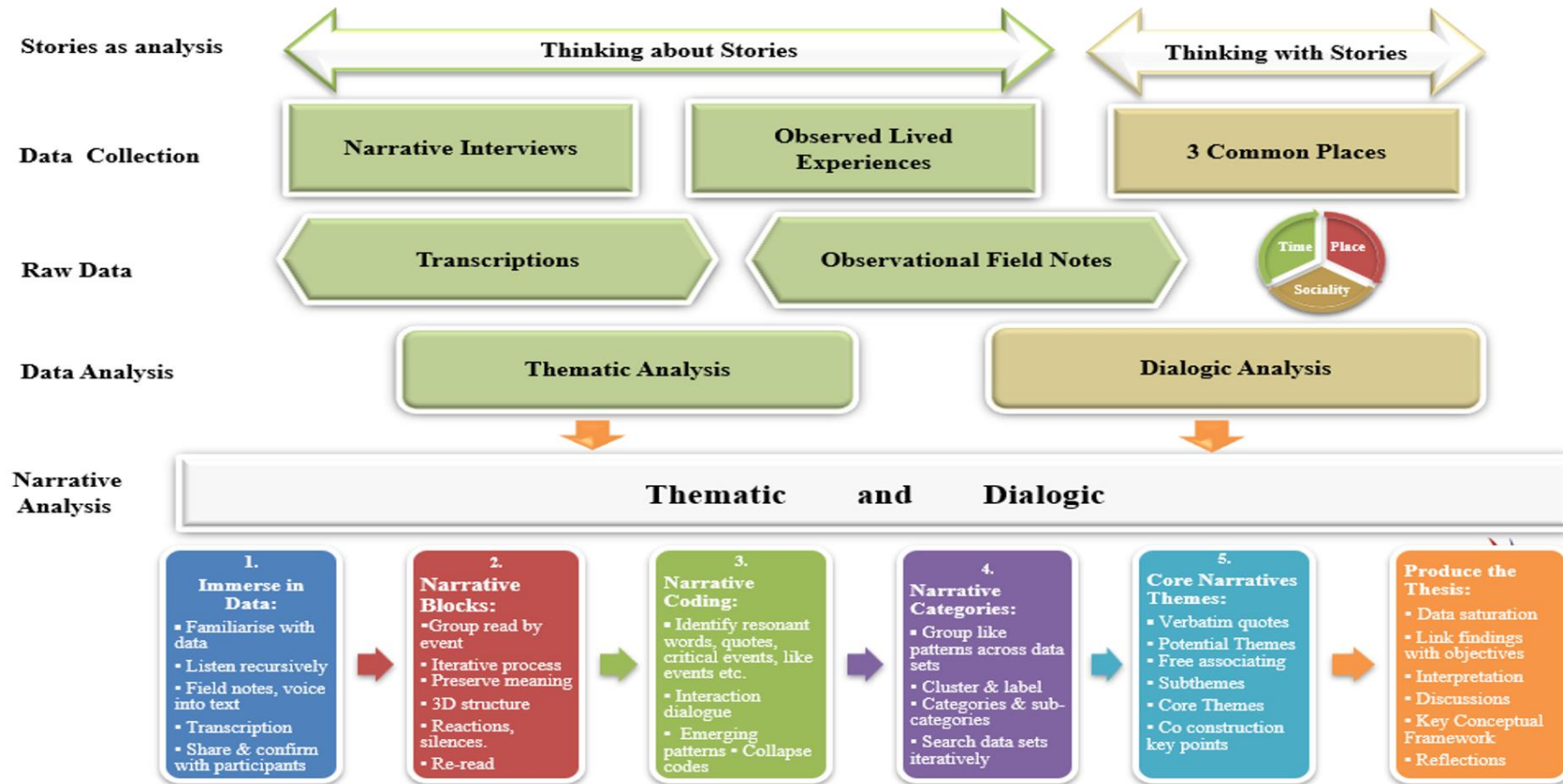
4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

The research approach is determined by the research question or type of investigation conducted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall, 1996; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The main research approaches are inductive and deductive, with the abductive approach being a hybrid of both (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The inductive design adopted in the current study began with a review of existing theoretical knowledge, followed by the collection of primary data from participants (Creswell, 2014; Lofland, Snow, Andersen & Lofland, 2022; Saunders et al., 2019).

4.4 METHODOLOGICAL CHOICE

An inquiry may be conducted using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, the latter combining the first two (Creswell, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Saunders et al., 2019). The difference between quantitative and qualitative research is that the former seeks to explain behaviour through objective facts independent of the researcher, while the latter is about understanding people's experiences within various contexts, as reported by the participants themselves (Firestone, 1987; Marshall, 1996; Marshall et al., 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The choice of qualitative research was influenced by the interpretivist philosophy regarding how paradigms were applied and viewed through an intersectional lens, as well as by my interest in gender transformation (Creswell, Hanson, Clark & Morales, 2007; Islam & Aldaihani, 2022; Tisdell, Merriam & Stuckey–Peyrot, 2025). This study seeks to understand in depth how and why African and Coloured women leaders plateau at mid-level leadership by hearing each leader's account. This makes qualitative research an apt choice (Lim, 2025; Marshall et al., 2022). Moreover, intersectionality seeks to foreground nuanced and granular experiences of participants under review (Humbert, Strid, Tanwar, Lipinsky & Schredl, 2015). This cohort is absent from private-sector strategic discourse; the qualitative research design is voice-giving (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tisdell et al., 2025). The qualitative methodological choice aligned with the aims of my study and the selected research paradigm. In the following section, Figure 4.2 (Narrative inquiry) depicts the research strategy applied in this study.

Figure 4.2: Narrative inquiry



Source: Adapted from Clarke and Braun (2017), Riessman (2005, 2008) and Rosenberg (2019)

4.5 RESEARCH STRATEGY

Qualitative research employs various strategies, including ethnography, constructive grounded theory, narrative inquiry and phenomenology (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I sought to understand, through storytelling, the reasons for the stagnation of African and Coloured women leaders in mid-level leadership by examining how they experienced the world of work and considering the intersection of social categories within a multilayered context. Narrative inquiry, as a strategy, is closely tied to non-Western forms of theorising and is preferred by black feminists (Chadwick, 2017; Collins, 1990; McCall, 2005). It is appropriate for illuminating individuals' experiences and social processes by eliciting their subjective perspectives (Clandinin, 2022; Esin, Fathi & Squire, 2014; Ghanbar, Cinaglia, Randez & de Costa, 2024). Narrative inquiry studies human sense-making, action and experience as story (Bruner, 1991; Butina, 2015; Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Kim, 2015). Storytelling is the most basic form of human communication (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Gavidia & Adu, 2022; Smith, 2016). Stories resonate with human beings in ways that other research strategies cannot (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Riessman, 2008; Rosenberg, 2019). In this study, the narrative inquiry was used to convey elements of experience that have profoundly shaped the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders (Mertova & Webster, 2019). The application of narrative inquiry in the current study is illustrated in Figure 4.2 above.

In recent history, narrative inquiry has demonstrated the power of storytelling as a management tool. Beigi, Callahan, and Michaelson (2019) conducted a 40-year study of 165 papers and found that storytelling in organisations had increased. In this study, interactions with participants revealed two of the five key organisational storytelling themes: sense-making, identity and identification politics (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Van de Mierop, Clifton & Schuur, 2021). In addition, storytelling in organisations can be a compelling tool for building trust, fostering transformation, and strengthening relationships when balanced to engage the audience (Patton, 2002; Stark, Reif & Schieber, 2022). It can be inferred from the organisational practices mentioned above that this narrative turn aligned with the purpose of this study, thereby aiding its accomplishment.

Borrowing from Dewey's theory, the storied lives of people should be understood through a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of time, place, and sociality, which co-occur (Clandinin & Huber, 2002:162). Participants interpreted their own and others' lives by referencing the past, seeing the present, and envisioning their hoped-for future through stories (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007; Gavidia & Adu, 2022; Rosenberg, 2019). A person thus moves through time, experiencing past life events, current events, feelings, and imagined and hoped-for futures, all of which are in transition and formed within specific contexts or places. Places are the physical settings in which lived

experiences occur and the fieldwork sites of participant interviews (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2006; Clandinin & Huber, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1988). Clandinin et al. (2007) assert that the exact place where narrative inquiry occurs is important, and the researcher should understand the meaning it holds for the participant. Fieldwork took place in places and spaces that participants felt comfortable with, thereby enabling detailed accounts of the environment's peculiarities and nuanced participant behaviours during such encounters. Sociality represented both the internal personal feelings and aesthetic reactions of participants, while external conditions concerned meso- and macro-level contexts and interactions between the participant and me (Chase, 2011; Clandinin et al., 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Esin, 2011).

All three dimensions of time, place and sociality coincided. Such interplay among participants' on-site reactions, their futures told in reference to the past, and the relationships they formed made it possible to recognise the experiences that shaped their stories. Below is a descriptive glimpse of a written-down lived experience and /or vignette with a participant:

One participant, Rosaria, a Coloured top leader, chose her patio as an interview site at her house. I commented on how beautifully trimmed her garden was and on the position of her garden statue, which held a pond of water resting on the little receiving hands of three praying angels. She shared with me that the statue represented three babies she had miscarried, explaining that “*It embodies my past pain, acceptance, strength, and hope beyond this earthly realm*”. She shared how she and her family commemorated the unborn babies and found healing and closure in doing so. She revealed that she drew strength from believing her angels journeyed with her through the ups and downs of her personal and social life.

This was a remarkable story; she had faced life's challenges and used her own illnesses, losses and disappointments to inspire colleagues and empower young people struggling with both work and academia to never give up on their dreams. She was calm, in control, and used an occasional “so” filler word, bridging the beginning and end of each portion of the narrative.

A vignette is used to capture participants' experiences as they occur, depicting poignant moments that enable the reader to feel as if they were there (Agostini, Schratz & Eloff, 2024; Eloff, Agostini, Dittrich & Mathabathe, 2023; Mackey, Bogalky & Petrucka, 2026). I had this visceral response of skin bumps as I listened to her lived experiences, imagined being her, and felt her pain in that moment. She shared sincerely and unreservedly; I was in awe of her authenticity as she spoke about her failures, too, and how she had picked herself up. Listening to the participant filled me with hope for the future, as

she shared that, in her profession, she used her pain to support young talent who felt dejected. I kept thinking that I had not come across such resilience and fortitude.

Even though the primary language was English, there was seamless code-switching to isiXhosa, isiZulu, SeSotho, Afrikaans, and, in some cases, colloquial language. Participants shared their personal backgrounds and career journeys and reflected on employment equity legislation and on how gender transformation initiatives were implemented in their workplaces, considering the South African socio-historical context. Field experiences and observations are covered in detail in both Section 4.8 (Data collection) and Chapter 5 (Research findings and discussion).

4.6 TIME HORIZON

The time horizon defines the period for the research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In research, a cross-sectional study occurs when a researcher collects data from a sample at a single point in time to investigate a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Saunders et al., 2019). A longitudinal study consists of a series of cross-sectional studies and data collected over a short or extended period (Saunders et al., 2014). The doctoral programme is, by nature, delineated by time. As such, this study was cross-sectional. Fieldwork took six months, from 31 January 2024 to 27 June 2024.

4.7 STUDY POPULATION AND SAMPLING

A study population is the complete set of individuals a researcher intends to study, from which a sample may be drawn (Creswell, 2007; Saunders et al., 2019). In this investigation, the target population comprised African and Coloured women leaders holding middle, senior and executive roles across various private sector companies in South Africa.

4.7.1 Sampling strategy

The sampling process involves selecting a portion of a population or universe to ensure representation (Creswell, 2014). In research, sampling is either random or non-random. Flick (2013) and Patton (2002) state that qualitative research is grounded in people's lived experiences and contexts; as such, sampling involves a purposeful, non-random selection of participants to understand the phenomenon under investigation. The main non-random sampling strategies are convenience, purposive, and snowball (Marshall, 1996). Participants were sampled from the Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces. Gauteng was selected because it is the country's economic hub, while KwaZulu-Natal is the third-largest economic centre. An additional consideration in selecting KwaZulu-Natal was that I was working in the province at the time.

This study employed purposive and snowball sampling to strategically select participants with relevant knowledge and experience in the private sector to answer the research questions (Adhikari, 2021; Flick, 2013; Patton, 2002; Saunders et al., 2019). Ten women leaders were solicited purposefully through my own networks (Patton, 1999). Existing participants referred me to an African and a Coloured woman leader who met the study's selection criteria, using the snowball technique (Cresswell, 2014; Patton, 1999; Saunders et al., 2019). Table 4.1 below illustrates the sampling and sample composition applied.

Table 4.1 Sampling and sample composition

COLOURED WOMEN LEADERS								
Number	Pseudonym	Sampling	Duration	Date	Place	Province	Informed Consent	Transcription & Analysis
1.	Verona	Purposive	2hr, 23min	16/03/2024	Restaurant	GP	Yes	Yes
2.	Rosaria	Purposive	1hr 36min	20/03/2024	Home	GP	Yes	Yes
3.	Karen	Purposive	2hr 34min	10/02/2024	Virtual MS Teams	GP	Yes	Yes
4.	Stella	Purposive	1hr 26min	03/04/2024	Hotel	KZN	Yes	Yes
5.	Vicky	Snowball	1hr 00min 00hr 41min	28/06/2024 05/07/2024	Virtual MS Teams	GP	Yes	Yes
6.	Collette	Purposive	1hr 37min	14/03/2024	Virtual MS Teams	KZN	Yes	Yes
AFRICAN WOMEN LEADERS								
1.	Terry	Purposive	2hr 15min	24/02/2024	Home	GP	Yes	Yes
2.	Thokoza	Purposive	1hr 09min	16/04/2024	Virtual MS Teams	GP	Yes	Yes
3.	Buhle	Purposive	1hr 30min 0hr 37min	18/04/2024 29/04/2024	Virtual MS Teams	GP	Yes	Yes
4.	Enkosi	Snowball	1hr 21min	27/06/2024	Virtual MS Teams	GP	Yes	Yes
5.	Mmabatho	Purposive	1hr 23min	24/02/2024	Restaurant	GP	Yes	Yes
6.	Malisa	Purposive	1hr 30min	30/04/2024	Virtual MS Teams	GP	Yes	Yes

4.7.2 Sample size

“The more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower the participants for the actual study” (Malteurud, Siersma & Guassora, 2015:1).

The sample size was determined by the research focus, questions, time horizon, strategy, participant type, the need to reach saturation, and other factors (Bekele & Ago, 2022; Kerr & Macaskill,

2020; Mbatha & Ruiters, 2025). Narrative research uses a few participants. One or two participants are considered sufficient for in-depth interviews such as life stories or autobiographies, and between five and twelve when the focus is on gathering themes across participants using in-depth semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (Chase, 2008; Esin, 2011; James, 2018; Kim, 2015; Lofland et al., 2022; Riessman, 2005; Staller, 2021). A small number of participants yields rich data and extensive knowledge about everyone's experiences (Butina, 2016; Clandinin, 2005; Malteuerud et al., 2015). The sample size for this inquiry was 12, yielding informative interview transcripts and achieving the study's aims and objectives (Patton, 2002; Staller, 2021). The scope of the study was narrower, with particular emphasis on depth rather than breadth, and the strategic selection of knowledgeable participants with leadership experience ensured they could answer research questions with relative ease (Adhikari, 2021; Bekele & Ago, 2022; Kerr & Macaskill, 2020; Sarfo, Debrah, Gbordzoe, Afful & Obeng, 2021).

4.8 DATA COLLECTION

I approached an African and a Coloured woman leader who met the inclusion criteria for the main study to participate in the pilot. Both participants were informed of the purpose of the pilot study and provided informed consent. They held middle-level leadership positions, one in the mining sector and the other in the food manufacturing industry in KwaZulu-Natal province. Their ages ranged from thirty to forty. Both held postgraduate qualifications and worked as human resources professionals. One pilot interview was conducted at the participant's workplace, a shared space, while the other was conducted online.

The pilot study provided valuable insights into the use of recording instruments, interview preparation, scheduling, timing, and interview sites. I accordingly ensured that I took hard copies of participant information sheets, informed consent forms, and the correct interview schedule. The second interview opener question was the only one that required modification, as both participants requested a repeat of the question (see Appendix III, Question 2). One participant preferred to host a virtual Google Teams meeting from her workplace boardroom. For the first few minutes, she could not get the platform to work. I ultimately recorded the virtual session on my mobile phone. For future interviews, I resolved to schedule virtual Microsoft Teams sessions myself to control the administrative process. I shared the pilot study findings with my supervisor and peers during a group supervision session, and the feedback was sufficient to prepare me to proceed with data collection.

It is worth noting that conducting virtual interviews was a new experience for both the participants and me. I was concerned about connectivity stability, muted sound and other interruptions. I was concerned about what it would be like to observe participants' reactions and settings. I also

wondered what would happen if participants were reluctant to have their videos on. After the pilot interviews, I scheduled the Microsoft Teams interviews myself and arrived online on time, ready to admit participants.

4.8.1 Narrative interviews

Guided by narrative inquiry data-collection techniques and procedures, this study employed narrative interviews and observed participants' lived stories (Clandinin, 2006; Riessman, 2005). Kerr and Macaskill (2020) and Mertova and Webster (2019) note that the collection of narratives constitutes an informal anthology of lived experiences, designed to facilitate reflection on and recall of significant events in participants' lives. Narratives are shaped by participants' environments, enabling them to construct the stories they tell in interviews (Chase, 2011; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Mertova & Webster, 2019; Smith, 2016). Apart from interviews, field observations while stories are being told constitute a data source for narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Kim, 2015). Narrative interviews and observed lived experiences were concurrent.

Participants provided me with at most three interview dates and times, which allowed flexibility in formalising appointments. For data collection, participants chose convenient venues that could accommodate uninterrupted interviews. All physical settings were accessible; one interview was held in a hotel cubicle, two in restaurants, two at participants' homes, and the rest on the Microsoft (MS) Teams platform. Participants who used virtual platforms connected from different physical spaces: two used their work office boardrooms, four used their home study rooms, and one used her personal enterprise office. The interview schedule and two audio-recording devices were used to elicit narratives. I still asked participants for permission to record interviews and assured them of anonymity (see Appendix II, Interview schedule).

To facilitate recall, the opening questions focused on participants' backgrounds and their career journeys. Subsequently, interviews became conversational, putting participants at ease. It was noted that nine of the twelve participants answered most of the research questions using only the opening questions, continuing uninterrupted until completion. Only research questions that were insufficiently covered were asked; this was beneficial for my study. Interview durations ranged from 1 hour and 9 minutes to 2 hours and 34 minutes.

Collectively, twenty-one hours and thirty minutes were expended on interviews. During interviews, it was essential to ask follow-up questions and probe to generate new meanings in collaboration with the participant (Marshall et al., 2022; Patton, 2015). Follow-up questions were posed to participants, in their own words, to elicit elaboration on an underdeveloped issue. Clarification of

points not understood was requested to ensure that the research aim was covered. Further narratives, probing key aspects of participants' lived experiences in the private sector, were collected, thereby ensuring that the research questions and theoretical interests were adequately captured through dialogue and subsequent co-creation. Although the lived stories observed were supplementary to the interviews, they were substantial.

4.8.2 Lived stories observed

Lived stories observed are based on firsthand immersion in the field, which enables the researcher to see, hear, sense, and experience participants' realities on the ground (Marshall et al., 2022; Roulston, 2014). During interviews, I paid attention to participants' prosodic features and noted particularities on site, doing so discreetly (Butina, 2015; Marshall et al., 2022; Smith, 2016). I also attended to my own predispositions and feelings and noted lessons learnt for subsequent encounters (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006; Marshall et al., 2022).

Participants exhibited varying moods, spoke freely, and seemed to trust the process. I was attuned to what was going on onsite in the least invasive manner, noting anything else that could help structure and interpret such reactions and the meanings attached to spaces. For online interviews, the physical surroundings were confined to the selected static background profiles, yet each conveyed considerable information about the choice made. In both media, I was able to discern gesticulation, emphasis, word choice, frequency, and other aspects of our interactions. Throughout the interviews, I remained aware of my emotions and checked in on how I felt. Once back home, I reflected on my feelings through journaling after each interview (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). On several occasions, participant narratives contained hair-raising moments or elicited feelings of sadness, marvel or other responses. My own emotional reactions and biases were triggered. I recall a virtual interview with one African executive participant, Thokoza, who shared how she was made to feel when her contributions were dismissed and ignored repeatedly by her leader; thrice she said:

“That job broke me, it broke me completely...” ...I would wake up in the morning feeling like not going there... I have my one-on-one... he pulls three files... then now you are boiling the ocean...If we cannot find each other on what counts, then I walk away”.

In essence, Thokoza's task was akin to an impossibility; as a result, she left her employment after less than a year's tenure for the first time in her career. I commiserated with Thokoza and understood why she was upset; that moment forced me to consider how my own stories of marginalisation intersected with those of participants, Thokoza's in this instant (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000; Mackey et al., 2026). I recalled a single moment in my own career that broke my heart. I had goose bumps, indicative of my critical perspective on the system. Recording interviews, taking field notes, and transcribing audio to text were key aspects of the research design. The subsequent sections outline data collection modes prepared for narrative analysis.

4.8.2.1 Observation field notes

Encounters and stories told on-site during interviews produced field notes (Riessman, 2008:42). Field note summaries were initially recorded in participant spreadsheets from the pilot study and thereafter from every interview. I noted my own instincts and ascribed possible meanings to what was done, why it mattered, and how it was said. Immediately after each interview, field note summaries were recorded under the participant's pseudonym, detailing what had occurred on-site, including prosodic features and pauses, and thus preceded the transcriptions. Each participant's field note was marked with a pseudonym, date, time, and place, as well as any peculiar items on-site and online, to facilitate recall. I kept my own journal, noting my thoughts, reactions, feelings, and opinions after each interview.

4.8.2.2 Immersion in data

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) assert that the value of narrative inquiry lies in data immersion and in emerging with truthfulness. Additionally, research data come in various forms, such as voice recordings, interview transcripts, field notes, and, in some instances, photographs taken in the field (Braun & Clark, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). I listened to recordings and preserved the spoken words, pauses, and utterances to accurately reflect the participants' interviews. I reread the transcripts, listened to the voice recordings repeatedly, sought meanings and interpreted participants' words, assigned appropriate labels and/or codes, and wrote short summaries of my interpretations (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017).

4.8.2.3 Transcription of recordings

Chafe (1995) and Tang (2023) recommend that researchers transcribe audio recordings to fully understand participant data. I resolved to do my own transcriptions after an unsatisfactory experience with a transcriber. I listened to fourteen audio recordings, including the pilot study, and logged draft text simultaneously in an MS Excel spreadsheet, as reflected in Table 4.3 (Rudimentary thematic narrative analysis; Riessman, 2008). I listened to each audio recording and drafted initial transcripts in accordance with the interview sequences to ensure that they reflected participants' feedback. Once the data had been transcribed, I shared it with the participants. I emailed it to my supervisor for upcoming supervision sessions, which entailed a critical review of the work done and free association. Five

participants were keen to obtain their data, while seven entrusted me with ensuring it accurately reflected their interviews. I became familiar with the participant data, thereby securing the accuracy of the narrative blocks. New episodes that did not stand out the first time would be noted for critical analysis and information. Data collection, rudimentary analysis, and report writing co-occurred (Lofland et al., 2022; Riessman, 2008).

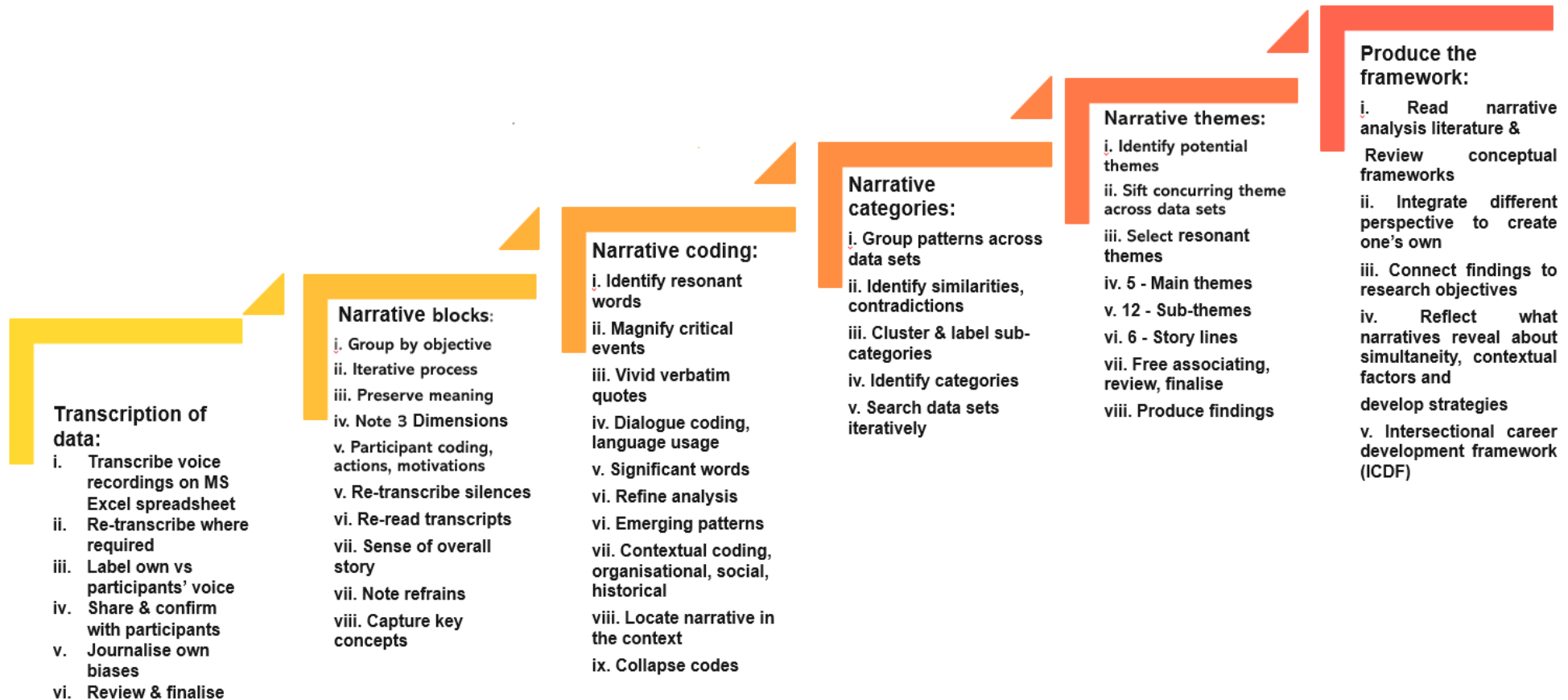
4.8.1.4 Narrative blocks

Transcriptions typically preserve the interview's sequential order (Maxwell & Chimel, 2014; Roulston, 2014). Sentences and paragraphs were read more than once and arranged into blocks or paragraphs that read like a story, with a start, the crux of the story, and an ending, which fortuitously followed the structural narrative analysis in most cases (Polkinghorne, 1995). Riessman (2008:2) states that different narrative typologies can be combined or co-occur, albeit with blurred boundaries. Narrative blocks recognise the essence of a conversation flow as the story is told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). Narratives that seemed to answer a particular objective question were cut and fittingly pasted in the applicable cells, and those that stood out were highlighted and emboldened to denote potential codes and/or verbatim quotes.

4.9 DATA ANALYSIS

In qualitative research, data analysis is ongoing and begins as soon as the first interview has been conducted, as demonstrated in the previous section (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Nowell et al., 2017). In narrative inquiry, data analysis may be conducted using one or more of the Structural, Thematic, Dialogic, or Performative narrative analyses (Kim, 2015). Thematic and dialogic narrative analysis were the most relevant for investigating participants' lived experiences in the private sector (Riessman, 2008). Thematic narrative analysis was used to identify what was said, recurring patterns and themes across the interviews, providing insights into shared experiences among African and Coloured women leaders (Marshall et al., 2022; Nowell et al., 2017; Tang, 2023). Initially, each data set was treated individually. Dialogic narrative analysis explored how participants constructed meaning through their stories, illuminating how their intersecting identities shaped their workplace experiences (Riessman, 2008; Tang, 2023). This combined approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of both the commonalities and complexities in participants' narratives, thereby aligning with the study's focus on intersectionality and the nuanced processes of meaning-making. Appendix IV: Rudimentary Thematic Narrative Analysis is an excerpt from one participant, covering transcription, codes, subcategories, categories, verbatim quotes, potential themes, free association with the supervisor, and peer feedback. On the next page, the thematic analysis process is illustrated in Figure 4.3, the Audit trail from transcription to the framework.

Figure 4.3 Audit trail from transcription to the framework



Source: Adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006); Riessman (2005, 2008)

4.9.1 Thematic narrative analysis

Thematic narrative analysis was employed to identify and categorise concepts with similar meanings from the transcribed datasets, focusing on the content of participants' statements and their underlying meanings (Esin, 2011; Mertova & Webster, 2019; Riessman, 2008). For each data set, my focus was on keywords, phrases, and even sentences that addressed the research question. Figure 4.3 (Audit trail from transcription to themes) above shows the process followed from immersion in the data to transcription and the generation of core narrative themes.

4.9.1.1 Generating codes

Prolonged engagement with the data, rereading transcripts, reflexive practice, and noting theoretical concepts led to the identification of concepts, potential codes, and suitable labels (Clarke & Braun, 2006; Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014; Riessman, 2005, 2008; Roulston, 2023). Data presented in narrative blocks enabled me to develop codes based on participants' attributions of their workplace experiences. Beyond the MS Excel spreadsheet, I translated each participant's narrative block into as many codes as possible onto Post-it notes; an example is illustrated in Appendix III, Manual Coding Process, Main Research Objective, thereby generating 150 and 194 codes from the Coloured and African participants, respectively. Familiar texts were organised into patterns and labelled with narrative codes, which were then collapsed into 183 sub-categories and 58 categories from all participants (Kim, 2015; Riessman, 2008). Appendix VII: Main Objective from Codes to Themes enumerates the data.

4.9.1.2 Verbatim quotes

King (2004) states that citations amplify participant voices and aid in understanding the source of themes. Moreover, Tang (2023) states that quotes are indisputable evidence of participation that produces useful findings. I repeatedly interrogated the data, iteratively searching for salient phrases and marking them as citations. Verbatim excerpts with similar narrative accounts across participants were clustered and written using words that conveyed both similar and dissimilar collective meanings. I read through the verbatim accounts and identified standout quotes as potential themes. One theme, five subthemes, and one storyline were derived from participants' verbatim quotes.

4.9.1.3 Assess potential themes

A theme is a typical response to a research question that is found across datasets (Clarke & Braun, 2006). The process of identifying themes was recursive and iterative rather than linear, as the narrative inquiry process depicted in Figure 4.2 might suggest (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017; Riessman, 2005, 2008). I cross-tabulated datasets, read transcripts, took detailed notes during group and individual supervision, and developed themes that represented participant data. In most

instances, participants' direct words served as suitable themes and sub-themes; in other cases, I used my own judgment to summarise core narrative themes. I would then present the work done to my supervisor for critique and feedback. During supervision meetings, we would engage with datasets together; she would share her views and free associations, and I would review themes and settle on the final core themes.

4.9.1.4 Core narrative themes

Themes were anchored in the data. In some instances, the presumed core theme changed. The main research objective was an example of the iterative process. The core theme was initially “some blacks are more equal than others”. After reviewing the data, many potential core themes emerged for the main objective; as a result, I identified “Shared inequality, discordant career narratives” as the overall theme, with the initial theme becoming one of the three subthemes. Furthermore, Table 4.2 condenses theme identification for all research objectives.

Table 4.2 Emergent themes to five core narrative themes

Research Objectives	Codes	Sub-categories	Sub-categories	Categories	Potential themes	Sub-themes & Storylines	Storylines	Sub-themes	THEME
Multineity of identities	344	183	58	36	26	8	5	3	1
Personal	53	40	25	21	12	4	1	2	1
Organisational	18	15	10	6	4	3	0	3	1
Socio-historical	27	20	11	6	6	1	0	1	1
Strategies						3	0	3	1
Total	442	258	104	69	48	19	6	12	5

NandiM:
5 Themes
12 Subthemes
6 Storylines

The physical counting of codes for the main objective, three sub-objects, and two objectives yielded 46 potential themes. Those that were duplicated across the data sets and/or had similar meanings or far fewer were either eliminated or, when significant, made sub-themes. Storylines were subsumed under related subthemes. One theme and five subthemes originated from participant quotes. Free associating with my supervisor helped reduce feelings of attachment and rationalise decisions about whether to reduce or keep. She suggested use of storylines for salient data that was not strong enough to become standalone themes or sub-themes. Appendices III, IV, V, VI and VII are visual representations of manual data processing, including cross-referencing datasets, coding, categorisation, theme identification, and distilling core narrative themes. Lofland et al. (2022) assert that qualitative data analysis is neither quick nor easy; it requires time and yields rewarding outcomes. The manual thematic process was painstakingly slow and exceptionally lengthy; the reward was distilling possible themes into a core narrative theme and related sub-themes and story lines.

4.9.1.5 Atlas.ti thematic analysis

Clandinin & Connelly (1990) signal their preference for a manual, immersive experience in thematic narrative analysis to yield rich data. Furthermore, Lofland et al. (2022) argue that, for online coding, the jury is out and, at best, researchers should not feel compelled to outsource their own analysis to a software programme. In this inquiry, the Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software was procured; however, the themes generated were somewhat generic and failed to capture the participants' voices and the potency of their stories. Computer-generated coding is convenient for managing voluminous data; however, conceptualising ideas and exercising discretionary judgment remain the purview of human beings, in this instance, the researcher (Clarke & Braun, 2006; King, 2004; Tang, 2023). I decided to apply the manually coded themes, as they better reflected the stories told and the narratives conveyed. An excerpt from Atlas.ti that reflects the themes is provided in Appendix VI.

4.9.2 Dialogic narrative analysis

Narrative inquiry examines the interaction between the researcher and the participant and the ways they build rapport. Researchers' stories are critical in building new ones in collaboration with participants, thus co-creating narratives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Roulston, 2014). In this study, I observed how participants shared their stories and paid attention to our dialogue. After conducting interviews, I would record pertinent aspects of on-site observations of the participants, using their pseudonyms, thereby creating a chronological tracker for each participant that served as an audit trail (see Table 4.5, Participant tracker for rigour). The first impression I formed was of how the participant received me and of the interview space. Figure 4.4 below shows photographs of the three physical sites selected by participants.

Figure 4.4: Fieldwork sites



From Left to Right: Hotel Cubicle, Outdoor and Indoor Restaurants chosen by Stella, Mmabatho and Verona, respectively.

At about 3 o'clock on a cool autumn afternoon, Stella found me waiting at the hotel. A hotel attendant directed us to a secluded cubicle with all the wall sockets I would need for my recording devices. The first 30 minutes were tranquil until an airline crew and a group of coworkers arrived. We were in the flow and decided to continue the interview because we could still hear each other.

Mmabatho chose an outdoor restaurant with wide spaces between tables, on lush lawns under shady trees. It was a tranquil setting, with outdoor sounds like birds chirping and servers occasionally asking whether we were all right. She told me that she had hosted her son's 21st birthday a few months earlier at the same venue. I gathered that she liked the estate. I was late for our appointment, so we started with brunch and then began the interview. The sunshine encroached on our sitting area twice, and we would move the table into the shade. The place was scenic, featuring beautiful flora in manicured gardens and other attractive elements. I suppose the choice was consonant with her environmentalist identity; it had meaning to her. We blended into the ecosystem.

Verona chose a cosy restaurant with a beautiful garden and a water feature visible through the window. The chirping of birds and the gentle trickle of flowing water produced an entrancing ambience in the interview room. She spoke freely, unscripted, for the first 45 minutes about her personal and career background, thereby touching on various research objectives and attributing unpleasant events to colour and, later, to gender. She maintained a steady composure throughout her narration, with pauses between sentences, a "progressive hit by hit" telling of her lived experiences. After our 2-hour, 23-minute interview, she suggested that we tour the building and share its history.

Mmabatho and Verona's interviews were conducted on two different Saturdays in March 2024 in Gauteng province. At times, there was inevitable spontaneity between participants and me when we concurred on an issue, thereby co-constructing. In some instances, the participant shared an experience that made us both laugh. Below is a vignette of such a moment with Vicky, a Coloured woman leader.

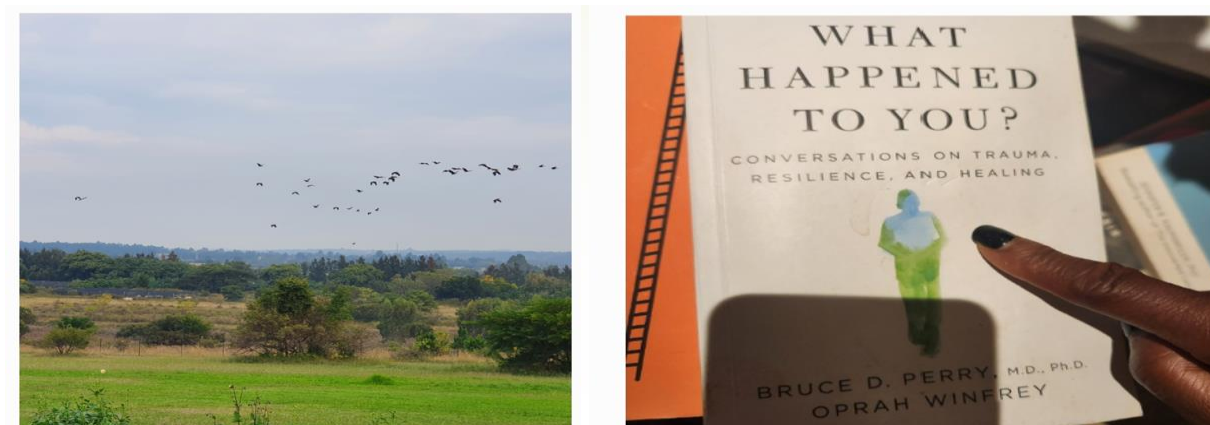
Vicky recalled an experience where her colleagues could not comprehend why she was ignorant about happenings during apartheid South Africa or even lacked understanding of specific sports codes. In jest, she recalled an instance where she was once asked, "*Where did you live? Did you live under a rock?*" We both burst out laughing. It was just the humorous way she narrated the incident.

I also noted the participants' places, our dialogue, and their reactions in the field. The vignette below presents an observational field note from an interview with Terry, an African woman in a top leadership role. Terry's interview was held on one of the raised, open outdoor porches extending from her house, which featured comfortable patio lounge furniture, a carefully designed garden, and surrounding areas that faced rolling green hills and beautiful vistas, all beneath a clear blue sky.

I remarked that the scenery resembled her rural countryside, and she responded, “*I modelled my house around my upbringing.*” Different species of birds flew past as if taking turns that afternoon. Terry said, “*I have now taken an interest in bird watching and understanding the features of each species*”. There was the occasional singing of birds; twice, a flock of birds flew past close to us. Terry remarked, “*I am noticing today these are just here for you.*” Terry pointed at a different flock of “visitors”, saying, “*These I am seeing for the first time; I think they are here for you*”. I said, “*Oh my goodness!*” Terry explained, “*And these are different ones, as you can see*”. I responded, ‘*Camagu, my ancestors are right here*’. There was a tacit understanding; we were in sync.

The final part of the dialogue exemplified collaborative meaning-making between a participant and a researcher, as the interview was not confined to a single question (Esin, Fathi & Squire, 2014). The participant remarked on her newfound interest in bird species that occasionally flew past her house and personified some of them as her visitors. The interpretation was located within a socio-cultural context that I understood, rather than within the planned research framework. This episode was unscripted, epitomising dialogic construction and a reciprocal power relation between the researcher and the participant at that moment. Terry volunteered information that was not asked for. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that, within the interpretivist epistemological assumption, knowledge is co-constructed by the researcher and the participant. Calafell and Eguchi (2024) and Claridge (2020) concur that dialogue between the participant and researcher becomes more power-balanced during field experiences. Below is a sample of on-site features from Figure 4.5 (Bird flock and a book).

Figure 4.5: Bird flock and a book



While on site, I photographed a flock of birds as they flew past us. Beside the outdoor couch, Terry had a book display stand featuring her most recent reads. Each time our conversation struck a chord with a book she had read, she would enthusiastically share its significance, pulling it from the rack and recommending it as a worthwhile read. I took a photograph of “What Happened to You”, a

title that resonated with the theme, “Women come on the back foot”. In fact, the theme itself was adopted from Terry’s narratives, further highlighting the connection between her lived experiences and the literature she found meaningful. Data analysis was intensive, making it manageable with 12 participants (Bekker & Ago, 2022; Clandinin, 2005). The following section covers the extent to which the research design of this inquiry fulfilled the requirements of trustworthiness.

4.10 STRATEGIES TO ENSURE RIGOUR

Qualitative studies are evaluated against the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, with corresponding techniques to ensure rigour (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Korstjen & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1988; Shenton, 2004).

Table 4.3: Trustworthiness criteria and associated techniques

Criteria	Definition	Techniques	In this study I ...
Credibility	True reflection of social realities	- Long enough time of interview 90min – 120min - Correct interpretation of meanings & confirmation of accuracy through member checking - Peer debrief and group supervision - Individual supervision	- In total 20hrs 26min interview time expended with 12 participants. 9 participants instantly liked given pseudonyms, while 3 opted for second options. 7 did not want transcripts, while 5 keen to receive, only 1 reverted with no changes. - Bi-monthly one on one sessions with supervisor free associating, reviewing, evoking equaled 28 hours. - Critical insights for querying for understanding & ideas by peers & at 12 group supervision
Dependability	Protection of data, consistent findings	- At least two recording instruments - Participant and self reactions - Field notes after each interview - Place atmosphere / context - Audit trail, findings supported by data	- Used 3 instruments on site, iPad, Mobile & recorder. - Shared transcripts with participants for review accuracy. - Encrypted data with multiple characters, filed in password protected folders & locked up physical files in a secure study cabinet. To be discarded post research.
Confirmability	Findings supported by data confirmed with participants	- Build relations/ co-constructing on the field - Cite verbatim quotes - Character & researcher reactions - Criss cross transcripts - Records of interviews, observations forming audit trail - Thick descriptions giving a vivid sense such that an outsider senses what occurred	- On site checked data with participants building relations and co-constructing - Cited notable participant verbatim quotes - Compare recurring ideas, group into themes - Kept a participant tracker, updating with each activity - Field notes depict believable text post interview and presented in findings.
Transferability	Readers of the study apply findings in other contexts	Outside assesses what could be applied in other settings.	- Enhanced understanding of a phenomenon. - Thick descriptions in text and visual pictures

Source: Adapted from Collins and Stockton (2018), Korstjen and Moser (2018) and Loh (2013)

Table 4.3 above presents the Trustworthiness criteria and the associated techniques used to ensure rigour in this inquiry. It was important to maintain a record of participants' accounts throughout the research process, using the trustworthiness criteria presented in Table 4.3 above.

Table 4.4: Participant tracker for rigour

Rigour		Coloured Women Leaders							African Women Leaders						
Criterion	Techniques	Shelley Pilot	Karen	Collette	Verona	Rosaria	Stella	Vicky	Phelokazi Pilot	Mmabatho	Terry	Thokoza	Buhle	Malisa	Enkosi
Credibility	Interview dates	31/01/2024	10/02/2024	14/03/2024	16/03/2024	20/03/2024	03/04/2024	28/06 2024 05/07/2024	31/01/2024	24/02/2024	24/02/2024	16/04/2024	19/04/2024 26/04/2024	30/04/2024	27/06/2024
	Starting time of interview	10:00	09:00	15:00	12:30	15:30	15:00	10:30	14:00	10:00	15:00	09:00	14:00	15:30	12:30
	Long enough time 90min -120min	1hr 31min	2hr 34min	1hr 37min	2hr 23min	1hr 36min	1hr 26min	1hr 41min	1hr 15min	1hr 23min	2hr 15min	1hr 09min	2hr 07min	1hr 30min	1hr 03min
	Correct interpretation of meanings	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Confirm accuracy / member checking	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Peer debrief & group supervision	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Individual supervision	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dependability	Record using at least two instruments (Mobile and or iPad and or MS Teams)	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	1	3	3	3	3	3	3
	Field notes after interview	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Character reactions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Place atmosphere / context (Home, Work, Hotel, Virtual)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Reflexivity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Audit trail	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Findings supported by data	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Confirmability	Cite verbatim quotes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Build relations on the field / co-constructing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Listen to recordings repetitively	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Criss cross transcripts/ constant comparison	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Records of interviews, observations thro trans is audit trail , how R conducted, description giving a vivid sense such that an outsider has a sense of what occurred.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Transferability	Outsider assesses what can be applied in other settings, because data is thick descriptions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Individual sessions with Professor	31/01/2024	27/03/2024	24/ 04/2024	30/05/2026	05/06/ 2024	26/06/2024	18/07/2024	31/01/2024	24/04/2024	27/03/2024	01/06/2024	26/06/2024	21/07/2024	27/06/2024
	Group Supervision	10/02/2024	13/04/2024	17/06/2024	17/06/2024	17/06/2024	17/06/2024	12/10/2024	10/02/2024	17/06/2024	13/04/2024	17/06/2024	17/06/2024	12/10/2024	17/06/2024

Nandi Manentsa:
Transcript, no
change. Preferred a
different pseudonym

4.10.1 Credibility

Credibility concerns whether the researcher measured what was intended and whether the findings accurately reflect the social realities (Creswell, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Korstjen & Moser, 2018; Loh, 2013; Patton, 1999). Interviews ranged from 1 hour 10 minutes to 2 hours 30 minutes; in total, 20 hours 26 minutes were spent in participant interviews and observations, as depicted in Table 4.4 above. Such duration enabled me to gain participants' trust and thus obtain in-depth information and a correct interpretation of the meanings attached to the phenomena.

Transcript encryption used participants' pseudonyms, interview dates, and a character. Before embarking on narrative data analysis, as a form of member checking, participants were sent WhatsApp messages asking whether they wished to review the transcripts and indicate their views on the assigned pseudonyms. All assented to the transcriptions; three asked for alternative pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Alternative pseudonyms were accepted. Approximately 28 hours were spent on individual supervision, with two transcripts per session, and the fundamental analysis was submitted concurrently. Moreover, peer group discussions provided another opportunity to receive external feedback on work I might not otherwise have considered.

4.10.2 Dependability

Nowell et al. (2017) define dependability as the assurance that the process followed was methodical and structured, as evidenced by documentation. I carried at least two password-protected tools and recording devices at physical settings. Field notes were stored in individual MS Excel folders, where interview data would be transcribed. I constantly updated the participant tracker with activities undertaken. The folder with the tracker and transcripts served as evidence of interaction with each participant. Hardcopy A3-sized files of the abovementioned data were printed and kept under lock and key in my study at home. All software folders were encrypted using a combination of the interview date, a character, and pseudonyms, and were saved on my password-protected computer.

4.10.3 Transferability

Rich and thick descriptions are hallmarks of qualitative research (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Ponterotto, 2006). Transferability was facilitated by providing sufficient detail to enable readers to fully understand both the process and the decisions made throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Marshall et al., 2022). Thick descriptions were presented as textual data through vignettes, screenshots of field sites, and the data analysis processes followed, so that in a similar context, a third party could apply the process in other settings (Nowell et al., 2017). The participant tracker in Figure 4.4 is an example of an audit trail.

Verbatim quotations from participants constitute a form of thick description (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Some notable words and phrases caught my attention; for example, Collette, a Coloured woman leader in the mid-level leadership ranks, declared:

“I keep the taste of poverty so close to me; it drives me to work hard”.

Meanwhile, Enkosi, a senior African leader, exclaimed:

“It has always looked like a sin to be Black!”

The interviews that were not conducted online via Microsoft Teams were held at venues selected by participants because they held special meaning for them.

4.10.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is the assurance that research findings, empirically sound data, and valid interpretations and recommendations support one another (Creswell, 2014; Loh, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). Guba and Lincoln (1994) posit that credibility, dependability and transferability are prerequisites for confirmability. I kept the audit trail up to date in case the inquiry were conducted again, as the findings would be similar (Shenton, 2004). I reviewed transcripts and retyped the text against the voice recordings, ensuring that it corresponded to the voice notes, noting pauses and silences, and including any omissions or necessary corrections. Notable verbatim quotes from participants supported all findings in this study, as demonstrated. Some themes and sub-themes were derived directly from participants' words. The participant tracker for rigour, shown in Table 4.5 above, served as an effective tool for ensuring the trustworthiness of the research.

4.10.5 Reflexivity

Personal narratives enable researchers to immerse themselves in a range of contexts, from giving voice to those whose experiences are lived at the periphery of a dominant culture to everyday stories (Creswell, 2007; Esin, 2011; James, 2018; Langellier, 1999). It is impossible to remove oneself from participants (Clandinin & Huber, 2002; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As a result, keeping a reflexive journal and recording my reactions after each encounter enabled me to account for my own positionality as a researcher. I addressed my feelings by noting my thoughts in my journal and sharing them during peer and group supervisory sessions. There was also resonance with participants' joy and feelings of accomplishment despite the odds.

Introspection throughout the data collection and narrative analysis processes helped me guard against overstepping boundaries and influencing participants. Given the rapport we had built, I ensured

that my own outlook did not hinder my ability to bring participants' stories to life, using reflexivity methods designed to circumvent inherent biases in the research process. Moreover, I held debriefing sessions with my supervisor and participated in peer-group supervisory sessions, which were restorative.

4.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Narrative inquiry revolutionised qualitative research by positioning experience as a narrative phenomenon and underscoring the relationship between the participant and the researcher, thereby making ethics the centre of inquiry (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Researchers have a moral obligation to adhere to ethical standards when carrying out fieldwork. In this study, ethical conduct permeated every aspect of research design, as demonstrated in Figure 4.1 (Research process – An overview) (Lofland et al., 2022). Narrative research is centred around people's lived experiences. It is ethical for a researcher to safeguard information that participants may have been hesitant to reveal (Denzin, 2009; Esin et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2022).

The Unisa Graduate School of Business Leadership (SBL) Research Ethics Review Committee (RERC) approved the research, as shown in Appendix 1: Ethical letter of approval. Once granted, I approached the participants and explained the study's aims, their rights, and my obligations as a researcher. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research process without providing an explanation. All ethical processes and procedures were observed.

Participants willingly signed the SBL Informed Consent Letters, which stipulated the ethical roles of the researcher and participants, and none were drawn from vulnerable groups. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the protection of each participant's personal information. Conventional research codes were used to conceal employers and the names of peers mentioned during interviews. The research records and data were stored on a password-protected personal computer in an encrypted folder. Tangible records are kept in a personal locker. The third-party service provider who analysed data using Atlas.ti signed the confidentiality agreement attached as Appendix II. In this study, potential ethical threats were carefully examined at each step of the data collection process. The study was in accordance with both the letter and spirit of the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.

4.12 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented a graphic representation of the fundamental research components. The philosophical assumptions and paradigms that guided this inquiry were explained, and their practical applications discussed. Furthermore, the inductive method, guided by the study's aim, was deemed the most suitable. This was followed by an explanation of the research strategy, participant sampling, and

data collection methods. Observed lived experiences, as narrated on-site, were presented in vignettes that demonstrated the collaboration between participants and me. The next chapter presents and discusses the research findings derived from the data, culminating in a conceptual framework for the study.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is a culmination of findings from participants' narrative interviews and observed lived experiences. Themes and subthemes, derived from both the thematic and dialogic narrative analyses of participant data, are summarised alongside the corresponding research objectives in Table 5.1, labelled “Themes and sub-themes”. To help readers understand the characteristics and assess the representation of the twelve participants, a summary of their demographic data is presented in Table 5.2 as “Participants’ demographic profiles”. The main body of this chapter presents themes and sub-themes authenticated by participant verbatim quotes, thereby prioritising their voices. Each objective is discussed and supported by extant literature. Results, discussions, and my observations converged into findings about relationships across three contextual levels, which informed the development of the Intersectional Career Development Framework, presented in Figure 5.2.

Table 5.1: Main theme, themes and sub-themes

Main research objectives (MO)	Main Theme
MO: Examine the extent to which race, gender, age, and social capital simultaneously affect African and Coloured women leaders' lived experiences within South African private-sector organisations.	Theme 1: Shared inequality, discordant career narratives <i>Sub-theme 1.1: Some blacks are more equal than others</i> <i>Sub-theme 1.2: Personal connections and not expertise alone catapults one's career</i> <i>Sub-theme 1.3: Intergenerational dynamics and other irrational ageist attitudes</i>
Sub-Research Objectives (SO)	Themes and Sub-themes
SO1. Investigate the extent to which personal factors facilitate or hinder African and Coloured women leaders' access to senior and executive leadership roles within South African private sector organisations.	Theme 2: Women come on the back foot <i>Sub-theme 2.1: When humble beginnings follow her to the workplace</i> <i>Sub-theme 2.2: Different self-narratives, divergent coping mechanisms</i>
SO2. Examine the impact of organisational factors on the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders within South African private-sector organisations.	Theme 3: Intransigent androcentric models shape alienating cultures <i>Sub-theme 3.1: Are we ever good enough?</i> <i>Sub-theme 3.2: Black women are held to different and higher standards</i> <i>Sub-theme 3.3: Shackled to golden handcuffs and chairs</i>
SO3. Explore the extent to which broader socio-historical and legal factors enable or hinder African and Coloured women leaders' access to senior and executive levels within South African private sector organisations.	Theme 4: Persistent apartheid (in)sensibilities – irreconcilable differences? <i>Sub-theme 4.1: Employment equity – both a blessing and a curse</i>
SO4. Identify strategies to advance inclusive gender transformation within South African private-sector organisations.	Theme 5: Nuggets of information for execution <i>Sub-theme 5.1: Things I wish I had known before</i> <i>Sub-theme 5.2: Make the circle bigger: beyond narrow cliques of women leaders</i> <i>Sub-theme 5.3: Put gender transformation on the radar</i>

Table 5.2 Participants demographic profiles

Number	Pseudonym	Age Range	Social capital	Highest qualification	Current Position	Years in Position	Leadership Level	Years in Leadership Level	Sector	Province
COLOURED WOMEN LEADERS										
1.	Verona	41 - 50	High	Masters in Business Administration	Executive Digital & Innovation	6	Executive	11	Financial Services	Gauteng
2.	Rosaria	41 - 50	High	Chartered Accountant	Director	2,11	Executive	5	Professional Services	Gauteng
3.	Karen	41 - 50	Low	Doctor of Business Leadership	Senior Manager: Global Rewards Design	5	Senior	5	Tele - Communications	Gauteng
4.	Stella	30 - 40	Low	PGDip. Industrial Psychology Labour Relations	Human Resources Manager	2,5	Senior	2,5	Agro-based industry	KwaZulu Natal
5.	Vicky	41 - 50	Low	ND in Human Resources	Head of People Services	1	Senior	7	Tele - Communications	Gauteng
6.	Collette	41 - 50	Low	B. Com Human Resources	Shopper Insights Analytics Specialist	1	Middle	12	Fast Moving Consumer Goods	KwaZulu Natal
AFRICAN WOMEN LEADERS										
1.	Terry	41 - 50	High	B. Accounting Science	Managing Director	5	Executive	14	Information & Communication Technology	Gauteng
2.	Thokoza	30 - 40	High	Honours in Business Management	Senior Director: People	6	Executive	3	Logistics	Gauteng
3.	Buhle	51 - 60	High	B.Admin Honours Industrial Relations	Senior Manager Human Resources	8	Senior	16	Petro Chemicals & Mining	Gauteng
4.	Enkosi	51 - 60	Low	Masters of Management in Business	Senior Manager: Global Leadership & Career	5	Senior	6	Tele-communication	Gauteng
5.	Mmabatho	51 - 60	Low	M.Sc. Environmental Management	Manager Environmental Safety & Sustainability	12	Middle	14,7	Automotive Retail	Gauteng
6.	Malisa	41 - 50	Low	B.Com Marketing Post Graduate Diploma	Supply Chain Ordering & Distribution Specialist	7	Middle	14	Automotive Original Equipment Manufacturer	Gauteng

5.2 PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES

Table 5.2 above presents participant demographic profiles. Twelve participants were drawn from African (n = 6) and Coloured (n = 6) women leaders who worked in diverse industries within the private sector in the Gauteng (n = 10) and KwaZulu-Natal (n = 2) provinces of South Africa. Two participants were in the 30–40 years age range, seven in the 41–50 years age range, and two in the 51–60 years age range. All participants noted that they had entered the world of work based on their own skills and experience and that they had low or negligible social capital at the time. Over time, four top executives and one senior manager accumulated high levels of social capital within and outside their employer organisations. The remaining seven participants reported low levels of social capital.

Four women leaders were in executive leadership, five in senior leadership, and three in middle leadership roles. Two African women leaders and one Coloured woman leader occupied middle leadership positions. One senior African leader had opted for a demotion to lessen work pressure and consequent health risks after toiling for several years in executive leadership. Mmabatho, an African woman leader in middle management, was planning to leave the private sector at the end of 2024 due to career stagnation. She had remained at the same level for fourteen years. One participant held a national diploma qualification, three held a bachelor's degree, four had completed an honours degree, four held a master's degree, and one held a doctorate.

Six participants worked in human resources, whereas the remainder worked in accounting, supply chain, telecommunications, environmental sustainability, information technology, and business digitisation. The predominance of human resources professionals is attributable to my work experience in the same discipline. In the next segment,

5.3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed the prominence of personal and interpersonal factors, deeply intertwined with enduring socio-legal and historical forces that shape society, institutions, and organisational culture. Findings from the individual-level analysis were examined with respect to the factors that enabled or hindered participants' mobility to senior and executive leadership levels.

5.3.1 Main objective: Simultaneity of race, gender, age, and social capital

Interviews explored the extent to which race, gender, age and social capital influenced participants' lived experiences of leadership in South African private sector organisations. The findings revealed complex ways in which these identity markers intersected and shaped the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders in South African private sector organisations. In most instances,

participants' experiences across the two groups converged, whereas in some cases notable differences emerged. What follows is an appraisal of the constitutive effects of identity markers on African and Coloured women leaders within the private sector.

Theme 1: Shared inequality, discordant career narratives

It emerged from the interviews that apartheid insensitivities still surfaced, albeit covertly, from groups that seemed to have the upper hand in terms of race. Coloured women participants lamented that they were “*not White enough*” during the apartheid era and are, under the current democratic dispensation, “*not Black enough*”. African women leaders countered, hinting that, in fact, both Coloured and Indian women leaders were the “*better Blacks*” in the eyes of industry captains. African participants reasoned that the personal attributes of Coloured women leaders earned them privileges and career advantages. The latter indicated that this was not a universal experience, as preferential treatment depended on phenotypes, language and accent. African participants felt judged more harshly than other groups of women, including Coloured women. Coloured participants, on the other hand, perceived their underrepresentation as a source of vulnerability. They, accordingly, tended to put their heads down. This is consistent with African participants’ view that Coloured women leaders were timid, while they themselves were likely to push back or leave the employer organisation.

There were instances in which African and Coloured women leaders experienced delayed career progression and were informed that their maturity levels fell short of the required standard and that they did not meet succession-readiness criteria for advancement to higher leadership roles. The participants expressed despondency, feeling that achieving their envisioned career goals was overdue. In some instances, conflicting views emerged regarding the younger generation of leaders, suggesting ageism. Both groups felt that their peers did not achieve upward mobility solely on merit, but rather by accumulating social capital through connections with influential individuals. Participants felt held to higher standards than their Indian and White peers. In the following discussion, verbatim quotes are labelled using (A) for African and (C) for Coloured women leaders. (M), (S) and (T) denote middle, senior and top leadership levels, respectively. In addition, usage of capitalisation in Black represents Black African, while black in small capitals designates the previously disadvantaged groups (African, Coloured and Indian) women and men.

Subtheme 1.1: “Some blacks are more equal than others”

Five Coloured participants strongly felt that their group's position regarding the career pathways available to them was unclear. They traced this from the dark days of apartheid to present-day

workplaces. These participants believed that they were disregarded and were missing out on opportunities to redress past imbalances:

...You are not enough Black, then you are limited if the quota is that at the senior management level, and it ticks the box...

Karen (CS)

You are not White enough, not Black enough, so what are we? When I recruit, I look for Coloured candidates, but again, they need to pursue a commercial career for me to interview them; there are not many of them...

Rosaria (CT)

Rosaria, a top executive, was intentional in advocating for Coloured talent to drive parity. Karen, Stella, Rosaria and Vicky found the shortage of Coloured women leaders within the private sector disconcerting, and were disgruntled by what they considered to be an influx of Black African women in leadership positions:

There are quite a few Coloured females who have elevated themselves into phenomenal positions and decision-makers and are now coming up to be role models to the Coloured girl child. There have been a lot of African females out there... There has been a slow change in comparison to African females, which has also been a hindrance.

Stella (CS)

In accordance with this view, Collette provided her own lived experience of being overlooked:

Sometimes you feel like being a Coloured woman... You feel others get preference. There was one lady of another race who was able to relocate to KwaZulu-Natal to get a function, yet I could not get that same role.

Collette (CM)

Collette avoided naming the “lady's” race. Perhaps being interviewed by a Black African executive from a company where her relatives worked was the reason for the restraint.

Karen indicated that she was struck by triple jeopardy in the workplace, on account of skin tone, race and gender:

There is much colourism that goes into that, perhaps colourism is not the right word because it speaks to something else... but the way I mean... it is that what I have seen and the right colour in a private sector organisation...

Karen (CS)

Storyline 1.1.1 Proximity to whiteness begets insider status

For Vicky, on the other hand, her fair complexion, silky hair, and thus her proximity to whiteness afforded her privileges unavailable to her counterparts. Vicky's experiences differed from those of Karen and those of African women leaders:

...Uhm, and becoming more refined in myself and the way I carried myself... spoke, of all those things because being a Coloured or Black female, there are already biases... preconceived opinions of what you should be, how you should speak... I think when people see something different, they are quite intrigued. I think this is going to sound... but it is what it is... having such fair skin as a Coloured female, I definitely felt advantaged, uhm, even if I looked around me, especially the way White people treated me versus the way they treated darker colleagues, or Black. I definitely felt more accepted by my White colleagues because I looked more like them, which earned me much respect from them.

Vicky (CS)

In contrast to Karen's lived experiences, Vicky aligned with the Eurocentric normative standard of beauty and appearance. Verona pointed out the preferred feminine look in some workplaces:

The MD there only hired slim women; he would say slim women, blonde, blue-eyed were good for business... Ja, and you know what, that is why I feel the best response to all of that is to work on yourself. If you are in such environments and you have low self-esteem, you will not survive.

Verona (CT)

Vicky alluded to acceptance based on her refinement, her speech, and her carriage. As Bourdieu (2018) points out, such attributes are used to gauge "social class" and decorum. Verona observed that the ascribed standard of a professional woman in business was a young, trim, tall, White woman from an upper-class background, which confirmed Patton's assertion that beauty standards were intertwined

with and defined by dominant Western expectations (Patton, 2006). Buhle also noted how language could be used to exclude African women:

At Exco... they would rather have Indian and Coloured... because they shall be able to converse in Afrikaans, because, as an African person... I do not know how to speak Afrikaans.

Buhle (AS)

Concurring, Verona recollected how language became an advantage, especially in her earlier career within the financial services sector:

Honestly, it has opened many doors. The minute I spoke Afrikaans with White people... it made a really huge difference, and I believe that is what helped me a lot. Uhm... there is just this thing about language; it makes you relatable... I think, especially in the beginning of my career.

Verona (CT)

Vicky and Verona's experiences confirmed the view held by African women leaders that Coloured women leaders had an advantage over them. At the same time, Karen's lived experiences, as a dark-skinned Coloured woman, made her "less than" within her ingroup.

Storyline 1.1.2 Language disfluencies and accentedness as status signifiers

Some participants shared experiences of feeling judged and discriminated against based on their command of the English language and accent:

You see those types of discrepancies in the private sector world. I also felt that sometimes, the language is the problem, because we do not come from good schools, we do not have the proper accent, maybe the way we speak... it gives me complex when presenting... A colleague told me that my accent was different. It was like a five-minute rant, and it made me uncomfortable. I know that it is a microaggression.

Collette (CM)

Collette felt judged and subsequently diminished on account of not only language and accent, but also her social background. Interestingly, people who are not black, for example, French and German people who speak with unfamiliar accents, are never problematised. Within the professional services sector, where specialised skills are an entry requirement, interlocking social categories assume a differing meaning:

White and Indian teams flourish... someone who has not been exposed has to build up... Most of the underperforming demographic is African... Young African women often lack confidence and struggle to articulate their thoughts. African and Coloured women and men are consistently below the median... "I had a low rating because I presented at the <management committee> and I could not get the words out." It is about going back to basics; African women are not articulate... it is easier to go with Indian or White.

Rosaria (CT)

Storyline 1.1.3: Black woman, you are on your own

This subtheme was adapted from the phrase and rallying cry, "Black man, you are on your own" (Biko, 2002:91). Participants indicated that private-sector organisations were beset by the old apartheid hierarchy of race and gender preferences and, as a result, promoted leaders along these lines. All African women participants reflected on racial preferences in private sector organisations, and indicated that they were the least preferred group, compared to the other groups of women:

The boiling point as a Black leader is Exco, especially as a Black woman, being the only Black woman at a senior level... When a Black Vice President (VP) leaves, and a White VP is appointed, they have it easy. Even if they are fumbling, it will not be picked up, because "you are one of us"... Indians and Coloureds were also treated less. White women feel they are superior to all three other women... when we are all seated mixed, White is preferable, then follows Indian, Coloured, then Black; we are still in apartheid hierarchy.

Buhle (AS)

Whites say an Indian is a better ally... to a degree, Indian people do not see themselves as too black, so they fit in this narrative. I look at Black competent leaders... it is so easy for a Coloured and an Indian woman to get a job within the organisation globally than for a Black woman... I am "Xolelwa Ngqaka", she is "Odette Hendricks". Sounds better! Now, it is not to say opportunities are not there; perhaps it is that pecking order we are talking about. Is it as open for us as it is for others?... For us in South Africa, it still makes sense to have a Black woman executive; the staying power depends on your resilience and how you navigate politics.

Terry (AT)

So, the next concept is the better black; in the pecking order of things, there are White people, then there are black people. Who are black people? A black person is a Coloured female; the next black person is an Indian female. Between the two, they could either go up or down, depending on the situation, and the last black person is an African woman. Literally, when you look at promotional opportunities for advancement training, exposure, it follows that logic.

Thokoza (AT)

Malisa elaborated on these claims. Her exact words, “*some blacks are more equal than others*”, underlined inequalities on account of race. She stated:

In meetings with so many Indian women and just our CEO and our Vice President (VP), who is White, you know!... There are no Black females, hardly. In fact, there was no Black female in the current intake. We cannot move from one position to the next because we know that an Indian female is already being considered for that position... EE is exclusively applied! Some "blacks" are more equal than others...!

Malisa (AM)

It became increasingly apparent from the above participant narratives that the apartheid race and gender hierarchy persists as depicted in the picture below, Figure 5.1. Gender and racial hierarchy.

Figure 5.1 Gender and racial hierarchy



From left to right, the African woman leader is at the lowest rung of preference, whilst the Coloured counterpart is better than Black but lesser than Indian and White. The sequence aligns with the annual employment equity race and gender representation across all leadership levels in the South African private sector over the past six years (CEE, 2024).

Storyline 1.1.4: People who look like me – an advocate who has my back

My mentor is a Coloured woman, and she rose through the ranks. So, when you stumble, doubting yourself, she is there for you, taking you by the hand and saying, "I have been there; let us refocus, let us go through it differently..." I speak to females, but they are not always recognised because of gender role stereotypes. However, you can also have some females who block potential. So, I was saying, the door is not open for you until somebody else who is already part of leadership says, "I am going to vouch for you".

Stella (CS)

...If you are struggling, how can we all help each other to get there? ... We are teaming up... motivating each other; we are not letting any of us lose or stay behind; we pull you up when we feel that you are drowning... That is where the magic happens... I believe it is what God decided when we came in.

Malisa (AM)

Stella alluded to being mentored by a leader who looked like her, a marvellous opportunity in a gendered organisation like hers. At the same time, Malisa's circle of friends took turns to motivate one another. In both cases, evidence of sisterhood was the first prize in their careers. In the same vein, it was alarming to hear that disadvantaged women themselves blocked transformation.

Sub-theme 1.2: "Personal connections and not expertise alone catapult careers"

Social capital and an influential sponsor were key to advancing careers into senior and top leadership positions. Relationships with influential leaders facilitated participants' mobility:

For me, as a Black female and even in my age, it does not work like that... I have been around for quite some time, and with the positions that I apply for, you want someone with extensive experience, and they are basically taken. So, it is almost like I am in a maze, and I am trying to get to the spot, but I must go around and find other ways.... In contrast, she can go across... get to the spot easier than I would, you know, so it really hinders you in that sense, so your connections must be bigger, your connections must really be bigger... Do I have a connection to get ahead now? No.

Malisa (AM)

Vicky, Karen and Verona thought that White and Indian women were adequately networked, not only at work but also through their families. They were, as a result, well-positioned for upward mobility. This placed them in good standing for opportunities.

... I think looking at colleagues that are White, or Indian, they have a lot of networks and mentors within their families, community, uh... they have more of that than we do... yes.

Vicky (CS)

There is a different hierarchy of socialisation... Indian people bring more Indian people; they are clannish... It becomes like a plan to accelerate their graduate development. It has nothing to do with competence, yet it happens.

Karen (CS)

Verona pointed out that psycho-social factors, including family background, might be root causes that blocked other groups from accessing influential leaders in the first place:

In terms of White women and Indian women, it is a fact that some of them do not carry the trauma; they are different, and they do not have those barriers on themselves. Then there is "you feel comfortable with people who are like you", where we come from a perspective that also plays a role in their progress. I think it is also up to a point; it might get them there, but it does not mean it is easy. There is a level of prejudice there.

Verona (CT)

Storyline 1.2.1: Having a feel for the game

Bourdieu (2018) and D'Este et al. (2025) point out that the combination of wealth, education attained from prestigious institutions, and powerful social relations enables individuals to navigate influential networks. Individuals who "have a feel for the game" embody refinement and decorum in social situations, which can impress key people and lead to lasting, mutually beneficial relationships.

Black women are expected to be mentors and advocates for transformation, while also grasping private sector language, despite their own personal struggles to advance. Meanwhile, White and Indian women grasp the private sector language and accelerate faster, while African women wait to be called.

Terry (AT)

Private sectors are political when you get to a certain level; you either must become friends with certain people, be connected to the right people, or identify a coach who can catapult your career. Unfortunately, if you do not, you are stuck because you are not recognised as that person.

Karen (CS)

My boss told me, "There will be this opportunity coming, and I will be so surprised if you do not apply", and suddenly, a White male was already placed from outside. Ja... So, so it... Indeed, it has impacted me and has held me back, ja!

Enkosi (AS)

In certain instances, cultural capital in the form of education, which is, in turn, shaped by family background, appreciation of the arts and sports, and ways of being within certain social circles, serves as a gateway to upward mobility (Bourdieu, 2018; D'Este et al., 2025). Both Vicky and Collette found their social capital limited:

They would speak to me about sports, and I had no idea what they were talking about, and I would feel stupid. However, on reflection, that was not my context... it was White people's sport, you know. I was not exposed to it... I felt so stupid a lot of the time.

Vicky (CS)

I am good enough to do the work, yet other people do not even apply for roles, and they get it because they are in the right place or they speak about the right sport with the right person. And they speak about playing games, such as rugby. The whole language in the private sector is different. I must say, being Coloured, in the age I am in, there is no network; your network is truly the father upstairs, the only way-maker that opens doors for you.

Collette (CM)

Enkosi had all the credentials for the role, yet she was passed over in favour of a male who lacked the requisite experience. Promotions to senior roles were, at times, unearned. Participants indicated that the requisites for upward mobility were far more than just education and skills. They were embedded in long-established reciprocal relationships, sustaining bonds within a closed circle.

Sub-theme 1.3: Intergenerational dynamics and other irrational ageist attitudes

There were shared views about the influence of age and time for promotion to the next rung of leadership. Age was at times used as a precondition for promotion and exclusion in key strategic meetings. Vicky and Enkosi shared lived experiences of being overlooked on account of age:

People thought that when I was in my 30s, I was in my 20s, and therefore not ready. There was this perception that you were still so young and not ready for the next level... a bit of a hindrance... frustrating.

Vicky (CS)

... I am almost about to retire; I have heard in the corridors people talking about others... saying, "do not worry about that one, they are at the door," and I feel like it is not right. If a person is still employed, they have the right to full benefits regardless... age does contribute, because you get excluded.

Enkosi (AS)

Verona, Malisa and Buhle, on the other hand, were sceptical about the younger generation of women, feeling that they wanted instant gratification, were celebrated too early, and were selective about the kind of work they were prepared to perform, which was certainly not going to be heavy lifting:

It is like an instant thing... things are going to fall into place... Unfortunately, the current generation has developed a mindset that things will happen. They do not strive for anything in particular.

Malisa (AM)

I hate the 20s, 30s and 40s celebrations! I mean, we are celebrating people who have not worked through their issues. The environment will kill them, the bank is hectic, they will take you out... It is survival of the fittest. In any business boardroom, they will take you out, it is the culture. How will you make it if you do not look at yourself?

Verona (CT)

... Some women technicians refuse to carry tools that are not necessarily heavy, and it is mostly young women... especially those in their 20s. They want their male counterparts to do that for them... Our children are different from us; there is a lot of entitlement mentality, which I have addressed.

Buhle (AS)

Verona was a proponent of self-sufficiency and of delaying celebrations of early workplace victories, whereas Buhle believed that respect for authority elevated talent. In professional firms, revenue is generated through billable hours, and time off for personal affairs, even as the modern workplace is realising that a hybrid work-life balance regime is frowned upon. Rosaria advocated for life-work balance and flexibility:

Older <associates> do not want to adapt; it is my way or the highway. When they report on you, they conveniently leave out the fact that you do not want to work at 9 p.m. That is biased again! They are set in their ways, thinking life was simpler. Older people do not take accountability for their actions; the aged are often perceived as prescriptive. Generation Z does not want to work nights and weekends. Who says they must if you choose to do so for your entire career?

Rosaria (CT)

I do see a new generation of boldness, and that makes my heart smile. I see them coming in their 24s and 25s, the Gen Zee, and those kids, no matter what, they can talk, and that makes me smile because we come from a place where we could not just do that.

Collette (CT)

The workplace comprises a mix of generations: the “old guard” appears eager to show the incoming cohort the ropes without first understanding their perspective. Enkosi and Karen fretted about whether they would be promoted and, if so, when. Considering their cultural capital, experience, and prior exposure, both were racing against their own set times. Yet neither Enkosi nor Karen mentioned speaking to their respective leaders about their expectations and aspirations.

Even though both groups of participants felt prejudiced on account of identity markers, the us and them in terms of race, gender, and social capital was more pronounced regarding who progresses and who stagnates. Five were still stuck in occupational levels that belied their experiences, while one sought external trauma counselling for restoration. Three participants found relatable mentors and progressed, while one formed an alliance with like-minded women leaders who motivate each other. Collectively, participant data indicated the extent to which the exacerbating and compounding consequences of intersecting identities in the private sector impaired the upward mobility of African and Coloured women leaders. This result underscored the need to shift from singular frameworks and apply an intersectional framework to illuminate the lived experiences, particularly of marginalised groups.

Discussion: Simultaneity of race, gender, age and social capital

The legacy of apartheid continues to seep through the gaps created by past laws; in this case, race and gender hierarchy in terms of preferential treatment (Casale et al., 2021; Esp et al., 2019; Houston et al., 2022; Tatli et al., 2012). Figure 5.2 above (Gendered and racialised hierarchies) demonstrates that apartheid gendered and racialised sensibilities still hold sway in South African private sector organisations. Even though the intersecting identities that were investigated for this study were race, gender, age, and social capital, in conversations with African and Coloured women leaders, new forms of domination emerged from the data. Four of the Coloured women leaders struggled with the dilemma of betweenness, white or black identity. Le Roux and Oyedemi (2021) argue that colonial vestiges persist in South Africa and among Coloured groups regarding the definition of self and identity. Du Bois and Marable (2015) describe this phenomenon as double consciousness, in which a person oscillates between two groups yet feels neither affiliated with either.

One of the Coloured participants, Rosaria, pointedly asked, “*So, what are we?*” This question indicates that race classification was conferred by society, thereby othering the group, as described by Du Bois and Marable (2015). In this study, Coloured women leaders found themselves in a liminal position, vacillating between whiteness and blackness depending on body features and language. When the above participant narratives are synthesised, they suggest that the antithesis of whiteness is less

desirable, ugly, below par, and insignificant (Crenshaw, 2013; Tewolde, 2024). Coloured women leaders expressed ambiguity about their own identities and concerns about their absence in the private sector (Forbay, 2024; Stone & Erasmus, 2012; Tewolde, 2024). Reflecting on her own identity, Erasmus (2001:13) says that: “Coloured-ness is not only not white, but less than white, not only not black, but better than black”.

Vicky and Verona’s experiences supported African women leaders’ belief that Coloured women leaders had an advantage over them. Apartheid-era racial and gender policies categorised women's groups as distinct from the archetypal woman in professional settings (Gray, 2018; Wagner, 2013); however, on an individual level, they were frequently treated uniformly, disregarding their complex and intersecting social identities even within their own group (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Dennissen et al., 2020). Due to colourism, fair-skinned Coloured women were valorised as they met hegemonic Eurocentric standards of beauty, while those closer to Blackness and/or Black African, were devalued and overlooked for promotional opportunities (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2021; Posel, 2001; Stone & Erasmus, 2012). There was a grading of skin tone; the closer Coloured women leaders were to Blackness, the less valued they were. As for Black African women, skin colour had been normalised as “less than”, such that there were no expectations of acceptance.

To negotiate one’s identity in the world, a challenge faced by some while others never have to consider it, is an experience rooted in otherness (Forbay, 2025). In this study, the workplace was evidently experienced differently by the Coloured women leaders due to multiple identities, phenotypes, texturism, embodiment, language, social class, race and gender (Brunsma & Delgado, 2008). In the South African context, some members of the Coloured community have historically distanced themselves from black identity, as discussed by Erasmus (2001), Steyn (2024), Tewolde (2024) and Wicomb (2018).

In this study, discrimination within and outside a single group was expressed through accents and proficiency in Afrikaans. Two participants were granted unearned passes ahead of their peers: one based on the aesthetics of whiteness and the other on their ability to speak the language of decision-makers (Bailey, 1998; Hesse-Biber & Barko, 2008). Bias was experienced differently, even by the same Coloured women leaders. Fair-skinned Coloured women leaders, like Vicky, seemed to fit the example of the model minority myth of previously disadvantaged groups deemed superior, and in turn adopted whiteness and behaviours that promoted upward mobility, yet were not entirely accepted as White by the dominant group (Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022; Metcalfe, 2024; Prasad, 2023; Walton & Truong, 2023).

Crenshaw (1991) emphasises that a challenge of identity politics is that intragroup differences are often overlooked, which can create uneasiness within.

The socio-political context constructed women's groups as falling short of the normalised standard of White women in the workplace (Choo & Free, 2010; Dennissen et al., 2020; Smith & Nkomo, 2021). Evidently, some participants received unearned passes ahead of their peers, due to differences in body size and phenotype (Patton, 2006; Tewolde, 2024). The ability to speak the language of decision-makers fluently placed them in good standing (Brunsma & Delgado, 2008; Prasad, 2023). Apartheid-era racial and gender policies categorised women's groups as distinct from the archetypal woman in professional settings (Hoobler et al., 2018); however, on an individual level, they were frequently treated uniformly, disregarding their complex and intersecting social identities even within their own group (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Dennissen et al., 2020). This means that women leaders may not be treated as a homogeneous group; the salience of identity markers may vary.

Historically, bilingualism, defined as fluency in both English and Afrikaans, was a key factor in securing favourable job opportunities (Sobane, Makoe & Van der Merwe, 2022; Terreblanche, 2002). Currently, there are 12 official languages, including African ethnic languages that were previously disregarded and, most recently, sign language. Dlamini (2013) found that the ability to speak Afrikaans, where it was a dominant business language, opened doors for women leaders. English is the most widely spoken language and the language of official trade and industry, as well as the private sector (Stats SA, 2025). Accent and language spoken are additional means of categorising the speaker's background, determining age, culture, social background and ethnicity (Harrison, 2014). Prasad (2023) agrees that the inability to speak English fluently, even in a multilingual culture, is still regarded as a deficiency among non-English speakers, with a prioritisation of form over substance. Invariably, those who do not meet the standard are made to feel inferior, and their experience and qualifications are minimised.

Language and accents are ways of categorising speakers' age, race, social class and ethnicity (Harrison, 2014). South Africa is a multilingual society; however, non-English-speaking black individuals who lack fluency in English are frequently perceived as deficient and are made to feel unintelligent (Dlamini, 2013; Prasad, 2023). Indigenous languages are spoken by at least 90% of South Africans, yet they are underrepresented in the business sector. According to Sobane et al. (2022:147), "African languages were not considered as capital and having currency in their own right". Despite the country's rich linguistic diversity, English fluency is often unfairly used as a measure of intelligence or worth, marginalising those who speak other languages. Houston et al. (2022) insist that language usage at work reinforces colonial, apartheid, class, and power divides.

During the apartheid era, the distribution and allocation of resources, such as per capita funding for education, housing, social welfare, job types and other state privileges, disproportionately followed the same pattern, thereby confining those in the lowest rungs to systemic deprivation and indignity (Gradin, 2019; Houston et al., 2022; Leibbrandt et al., 2010). Mayiya et al. (2019) and Terreblanche (2002) expand on this, stating that the Black African majority were denied privileges bestowed on their counterparts. “White privilege and relative privilege to Indians and Coloureds enjoyed during apartheid is a legacy of apartheid, and it is protected and maintained during the post-apartheid era” (Houston et al., 2022:38). It can be concluded that African women were at the bottom of the food chain due to not just race, but gender and social class (Casale et al., 2021; Mbatha & Ruiters, 2025; Phaswana, 2021; Salter et al., 2018; Zondi, Mtyingizane, Mchunu, Gordon and Roberts, 2022). The apartheid legacy of political and structural intersectionality persists:

The study revealed that in the workplace, upward mobility remained similarly structured, with Black African women leaders at the lowest rungs of leadership (Dlamini, 2013; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022; Tatli et al., 2012). Black African women felt prejudged and held to higher standards than their peers. They remain deprived of a common status with their colleagues, as privileges differ. When privileges are granted to some individuals while others are overlooked or erased, this not only creates a sense of separateness but also undermines the feeling of community (Daye, 2024; Patton, 2008). Such practices can lead to increased interracial tensions and hostilities, as groups feel excluded or unfairly treated.

In the same vein, it was concerning to hear that disadvantaged women themselves blocked transformation. It has been said that women who work in predominantly male organisations tend to distance themselves from their own groups (Baykal et al., 2020; Dashper, 2019). Hirji (2021) and Zajiji et al. (2021) argue that such behaviour is driven by self-preservation in hostile environments, in which other women forgo sisterhood and side with agents of domination to secure rewards for their consent. Such women feel that being female signifies a deficiency because it is associated with soft qualities, such as caring and empathy, rather than with excellence and tough decision-making. As a result, they become hostile towards other women (Acker, 1990; Baykal et al., 2020; Dashper, 2019). Terry, Rosaria and Stella verified these viewpoints.

While there was evidence of contestation among women leaders, some stood on the side of good. Bourke and Dillon (2018) and Jackson and Joshi (2011) assert that prospective employees are attracted by companies with people who look like them. The formation of allyships, which involves people who “look like us” in the workplace, has the potential to disrupt the “us-and-them” syndrome that African

and Coloured women leaders currently face (Freeman & Huang, 2015; Prasad, 2023; Zajijji et al., 2021). Proportional representation of women in senior leadership positions is a strong motivator for junior employees who see themselves reflected in leadership (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Ely & Thomas, 2001). The accelerated promotion of all women, particularly African and Coloured women leaders, would send a strong message that leadership is also accessible to them, regardless of apartheid's historical discrimination.

Mmabatho's specialist position as a sustainability scientist demonstrated how gender and occupational role fit were conceptualised by senior male leadership, both of which attest to the "glass slipper does not fit" representation of gender. Masculinity dictates which roles are exact fits for males and which are designed for female bodies and People of Colour (Dashper et al., 2024; Simpson et al., 2012; Simpson & Kumra, 2024). Women who are deemed to deviate from the norm are ostracised and their knowledge negated (Prasad, 2023).

In this study, social capital was regarded as either high or low (Claridge, 2020). Any one of the following or a combination of them endowed recipients with access to influential networks: social background; having attended prestigious educational institutions; family origins; intellectual credentials; bank elite; and high-level corporate and political elites (Bourdieu, 2018; D'Este et al., 2025; Rigolini & Huse, 2021; Soudien, 2008; Smith & Nkomo, 2021). Social capital is important in progressing to high levels of leadership (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Lin, 2008; Podolny & Baron, 1997). Findings revealed that African and Coloured women leaders lacked either key information or access to connections who could raise their profiles and enhance their promotional prospects in the workplace. To be informed, one must be in the inner circle, where tacit knowledge about career progression in the workplace is shared (Hoobler et al., 2018).

Malisa was recognised for exceptional skills and performance in a specialist role; however, progression to senior leadership had been withheld for the previous seven years. Subjected to the "golden handcuffs" syndrome (Senge & Forrester, 1987), she was feeling demoralised and dejected. This could be due to a leader who relied on her expertise, thereby hindering her upward mobility. Keeping talented individuals in middle management has unintended consequences for organisations. Senge and Forrester (1987) and Steinfield et al. (2019) posit that not only does this layer become demoralised, but the talent pipelines for the next generation of leaders in junior leadership are also blocked, as they view middle management as a stepping stone to senior roles that are not in the distant future.

In essence, the plight of African and Coloured women leaders has a domino effect on the entire race and gender group within corporate South Africa. African and Coloured women leaders constitute the largest share of the economically active population in the country when race and gender are combined (CEE, 2023; Mayiya et al., 2019). Overlooking this group poses an existential threat to organisations that serve clients from such communities. In middle leadership roles, talent pipelines become blocked, and aspirant first-line leaders become demoralised as they wait longer than anticipated for their turn, rendering senior leadership out of reach for aspiring African and Coloured women leaders (Dlamini, 2013; Mayiya et al., 2019). Bosch and Booysen (2021) advocate shifting away from focusing on women's inadequacies within organisational structures, cultures, and norms that maintain inequalities and masculine control.

According to the participants, promotions to senior roles were at times undeserved. They believed that the requisites for upward mobility extended beyond education and acquired skills; they were embedded in long-established reciprocal relationships and in self-sustaining bonds from within (Claridge, 2020; Tindall et al., 2024). Social capital and subsequent sponsorship and endorsements are important in progressing to high levels of leadership (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Lin, 2008; Mbatha & Ruiters, 2025). African and Coloured women leaders felt that their peers did not earn upward mobility solely on merit, but rather through the accumulation of key relationships with influential individuals. Malisa attributed her lack of social networks to being stuck in a maze while trying to gain recognition for a promotion to senior leadership. This is akin to a labyrinth, where others reach the destination far more quickly through established networks (Eagly & Carli, 2018; Forbay & Mnguni, 2024; Ncube, 2018). Anecdotal evidence from qualitative interviews suggests that these women were occasionally excluded from informal networks, which hindered their access to critical information and career advancement opportunities (McDonald et al., 2024; Tindall et al., 2024).

It is apparent that, beyond acquired knowledge through education, participants were expected to be fully conversant with unfamiliar cultural norms, such as rugby and golf, and to understand what not to do to attain elite membership (Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2021; Rigolini & Huse, 2021). The apartheid divide extended beyond cultural activities; sporting codes were class-based, and white sport was separated from grassroots black sport (Desai, 2022; Houston et al., 2022). Bourdieu (1986) and McCormick (2006) explain that both social and cultural capital reflect family backgrounds. Findings show that participants felt they were misfits as they could not pass the elitist etiquette test.

There were shared views on the influence of age and, by extension, on the time required to be promoted to the next leadership rung (Bae & Choi, Super, 1980; 2020). Participants commented on

inter-generational dynamics in the workplace and accessing opportunities. There were mixed views about younger women leaders, ranging from disappointment to admiration. Some participants appeared eager to show the incoming cohort the ropes, yet they did not understand the incoming cohort's perspective (Mbatha & Ruiters, 2025). Perceptions bordered on stereotypes (World Health Organisation, 2020). In this study, only two participants were close to the maximum age for South African youth, 35; both were approximately 40 years old at the time of the interviews. The younger generation was thus spoken for in this inquiry. Alcoff (2008) posits that representing others is sometimes unavoidable when it is not motivated by domination. She nevertheless suggests that it is better to engage in conversations and speak with others rather than speak for them.

The workplace comprises a mix of generations, enabling both younger and older employees to experience age-related prejudice (Swift et al., 2022; Ye & North, 2024). In the literature, attention has been given to prejudice against the ageing group at the expense of the concerns of the young; this does not augur well for posterity (Bratt, Abrams & Swift, 2020). In this study, there were corridor mutterings about older colleagues at the door, which hint at ageism towards employees deemed old and, consequently, not qualifying for leadership development (Calasanti & King, 2015; Francioli & North, 2024; Holman and Walker, 2021).

Intersectionality is not meant to be comfortable; some meet it with scepticism and silence (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989, 2000). Structural prejudice requires structural solutions (Collins, 2025).

5.3.2 Sub-Research Objective 1: Personal factors

Under objective (a), interviews probed the extent to which personal factors facilitated or hindered access to senior and executive leadership roles in South African private sector organisations. Participants' personal backgrounds negatively impacted self-worth, agility in navigating the private sector landscape, and managing expectations to be vocal about transformation while experiencing discrimination themselves. Five Coloured women leaders mentioned broken family structures and a community both in deprivation and perpetual deterioration as sources of feelings of inadequacy. African women leaders felt it was unwise to self-promote and waited for leadership to recognise their outstanding work.

Theme 2: Women come on the back foot

Through the benefit of hindsight, Terry, a managing director of a company, realised that when women leaders, particularly Black women leaders, ascended the private sector ladder, they could be forgiven for missteps as they “came on the back foot”, redefining who they should become without a

private sector roadmap, amid differing expectations from stakeholders. Terry recounted how her manager set her up to fail:

... I was swamped, sitting in the evenings; I did not know what to look for, which knowledge exchange, which portal to search for information... Another partner, a White male, came in... he asked me, "What is happening?" I told him... he asked... "So, were you given guidelines?" I said no; he said "bullshit, leave that"... the following morning, my boss, a naturalised Black woman, called me to her office and said, "Oh, it was a test!"... I was livid <emotional> ... I felt that, no matter how many challenges I face, I do not want to lead like that.

Terry's leader, an executive, was not about to exercise the "ethics of care" sisterhood virtues; her new subordinate (Held, 2005, 2018) had to forge her own path and earn her credibility. Terry reflected on the episode, years later, as an executive herself:

I have gotten to understand that they were finding their feet, you know... while being mentors to us, and still... in the learning phase in the executive boardrooms. It was not easy because they had not achieved that level compared to other women executives... I would have chosen to say that the White woman executive was a better leader, but she was privileged; she did not face the same challenges as the others.

Terry (AT)

In some instances, a participant presented with an internalised inferiority complex:

Ja... being in the private sector world, I think as a woman of colour... You come up with many insecurities... I ask myself, how did I ever make it into the line here? I do not see myself as a leader. Destined for something else, how is it that I am sitting in a room full of high-level people... The sense of belonging is not always there. I still do not feel like I am speaking or doing things right. One day, I am walking past another boardroom... it is only White people. However, I am like, the divide is still there.

Collette (CM)

However, we want to be perfect... Uhm, it is nature; women are naturally perfectionists... especially African women. Maybe I think it comes from where we come, how we grew up... it is almost like we show up apologetic most of the time.

Enkosi (AS)

When I meet ladies, I ask them, "Have you dealt with your childhood issues?" especially if we are non-White... We have them, you know; we come from poverty... they are consciously there, and they tell you stories about yourself, and what you are seeing; it is like a lens, a filter. Until you have worked on that, it is difficult to break through the ceiling, and then we think it is everybody else. I am not saying there is no problem; we need to break the things that hold us back, particularly around poverty thinking, and we must do so.

Verona (CT)

Verona strongly believed that the onus lay on individuals to consider their own mobility barriers, particularly within previously disadvantaged groups. Her assertions demonstrated her agency in addressing challenges. Both Buhle and Terry expressed disappointment about brotherhood in the workplace; at times, "our own brothers" undermined African women leaders' abilities to resolve matters:

The portfolio was larger; it was a highly unionised company. It was not easy. I remember calling the union members and saying, " You were happy that a Black woman was appointed, but now you are making things challenging for me. I still need to do my job; I have a mandate within the organisation to ensure people processes are successful.

Buhle (AS)

Meanwhile, Terry was forewarned, albeit informally and lightly, about how she should navigate the new territory with her new manager:

The outgoing MD advised, "Do not argue with his perspective"; laughing, he said to me, "Tell me after a year what it looks like, jokingly. I was trying to get their salaries adjusted... something happened with the Black community. Some came to say, 'No, no offence, if the previous MD, a White guy, failed, it is not going to be possible with you. They said, 'We are here to help... 'I said Do not! I will handle it. The most unfortunate... was to form a union... what was it?... a vote of no confidence on a Black leader? Even if... they were trying to assist. So, when all that was happening... <my boss> said to me, So, who were you doing this for? Look at your people; they have gone to form a union... Sometimes when we are assigned to these roles, the expectations... our own people... do not believe you can do it, not unless you are assisted... Some salaries were increased, there was a programme of transformation, I won in that form, but... my career! <sadness>... that was the end of my era...

Terry (AT)

Both Buhle and Terry's experiences suggest sexism and gender role stereotypes, where women are either reviled for performing nontraditional roles or deemed incapable and needing help.

Sub-theme 2.1: When humble beginnings follow her to the workplace

Participants shared how their upbringing experiences influenced the women leaders they were becoming in the private sector, with feelings oscillating between self-belief and doubt, shaped by interlocking systems of power. Prominent intersectional differences extended beyond race and gender, encompassing aspects such as language, accent, social class and family structures.

So... in terms of what hindered me from making changes, it was because I was female. Growing up, you always have this lack of confidence, which has hindered me, and the fact that I am a Coloured female as well. So... our history and what we have been taught there are certain things—where you belong, what you can do, what you can't do, and so forth—all that social impact created a significant fault in my movement forward.

Stella (CS)

Due to a lack of confidence... and not being able to speak up for myself. You know, I grew up in rural areas, brought up by my grandmother, so I carried all those values to the work environment, but the disadvantage it had on (sic) my early career years <emphasis>!... So, I think that background... how we were brought up contributed a lot, you know... I am still holding those values, such as respect. However, in a work setting, there are certain expectations; we expect people to be candid, confident, and assertive.

Enkosi (AS)

The legacy of apartheid discrimination instilled indecision and fear of authority in Stella and Enkosi's dispositions in the workplace, resulting in missed opportunities. It is interesting to note that both participants attributed feelings of self-doubt solely to their family origins rather than an elite culture and norms that do not provide requisite navigation tools, thereby rendering them misfits.

Storyline 2.1.1: Everyone can reach significance given a chance

In some instances, White male leaders overlooked traditional constraints and artificial boundaries. Both Thokoza and Terry were coached and mentored by White male leaders, thus unsettling the notion that sponsors were brought in only from within one's tribe.

I have truly been blessed by the best of both leadership styles to learn from, and I have had the worst to learn from... I was introduced to the concept of mentorship quite early in my career, and I have had a structured acceleration development programme that has set me up in a managerial role. I have had great successes in both programmes, where I have had international coaches... White mentors, Black sisters I can tap on... I specifically chose people who are not black; by black, I mean three tiers of black... I was blessed with mentors who were not South African; they were not bogged down by South African issues, as far as racism is concerned, and they were not trying to manage the situation by taking me on.

Thokoza (AT)

I started in an audit firm... You had to stand out; otherwise, you would be crushed. The exemplar was when I was leaving; the senior partner, <name>, gave me a book, “Twenty-One Qualities of a Leader”, to read, because he saw me through the journey and my career: “I see a leader in you; you faced so many difficulties in your career, yet you remained resilient, stayed on even when it was tough”. I thought nothing of it when he gave it to me at the time, but later I reflected on it.

Terry (AT)

It is not incidental that both Thokoza and Terry reached senior leadership roles in their late thirties and then progressed to top leadership positions in their forties. Both excelled in their respective spheres of work and made difficult decisions to leave rather than submit to hegemonic masculinity.

Almost all participants adopted their own ways of anchoring themselves during difficult times at work.

Sub-theme 2.2: Different self-narratives, divergent coping mechanisms

African and Coloured women leaders found themselves in an oppressive double bind – damned for avoiding politics and put in their place when they spoke up. African women leaders felt judged more harshly. Coloured women leaders perceived their underrepresentation as a source of vulnerability. They, accordingly, tended to put their heads down. African women leaders believed Coloured women leaders were timid, while they themselves were likely to push back or leave. Both groups found distinct ways to navigate alienating corporate environments.

Malisa and Verona believed that they did not have to retaliate when triggered by work colleagues, because God would “stand in the gap”, while Buhle thought that the best way was to disarm denigration with kindness:

...He was bullying me. He could not find any fault with my work... I felt vulnerable... My grandmother raised me never to fight back; God would deal with it. I moved into another department, and I told myself I would bring my A game, do amazing things; that is what I did... to get my confidence back... A few months later, he was told to leave. That was karma!

Verona (CT)

I am Christian, so I always believe God put me in this space... When I am hindered by the politics and everything that I see around me, I am basically saying to God... I only work for you... Moreover, I know that you will make a way for me when I do not see a way, you know. So, I push myself, and as much as I push myself, guess what: my work is still recognised as much as they are doing what they do. It almost becomes "Oh my gosh", but we cannot overlook this. Like, "she is really breaking boundaries".

Malisa (AM)

Resilience is what makes a Black leader navigate in a society where they come in, and colleagues have already judged them, that they are appointed because they are Black. I treat people with a smile and kindness, which has helped me cross bridges that are not crossable and has served me well.

Buhle (AS)

As for Terry, her resolve came from listening to podcasts, engaging peers, exchanging ideas, and reading books on resilience, strategy and authentic leadership. Thokoza felt that having exhausted all avenues, the only option was to fight back or leave:

I felt "boxed in" in my options as a Black female leader, and what was available in the product division was there, but it was not specifically available to me. Others could tap in, but I could not, so I thought, let me spread my wings. So, I left...

Thokoza (AT)

Some of the participants tried to work harder than their peers to be recognised, while Rosaria and Stella advocated for perseverance until "they" see you:

This man asked me to leave for divorcing my husband, because of religion... my grandmother raised me in a way that you never fight back, God will deal with it... I had to work hard to get my confidence back.

Verona (CT)

Participants felt they were in a “weakened position,” and that their roots and families of origin resulted in poor self-concepts, putting them on the back foot compared to their Indian and White counterparts. It is through building resilience strategies that nine of the twelve women leaders could at least reach senior and top leadership roles in the private sector, with some having built some social capital over time. Challenges are unrelenting, even beyond mid-level leadership, as identities repeatedly exacerbate either privilege or oppression.

Participant narratives revealed how interlocking micro- and/or personal factors, along with intersecting identity markers, impaired their self-esteem, interactions with peers, and leadership, thereby confining them to obscurity and thwarting consideration for strategic leadership roles. This finding is a compelling argument for replacing current singular frameworks with an intersectional lens to probe the prevalence of subordination and advantage in the private sector.

Discussion: Personal factors

Findings suggest that modest backgrounds led to internalised feelings of inadequacy (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2021). Shared narratives revealed a gendered culture that erased most and recognised a few in strategic roles. It was expected of African and Coloured women leaders to grasp company norms, be vocal about transformation, and lift their own ilk as they “rose”, while experiencing difficulties in the absence of role models (Casale et al., 2021; Espi et al., 2019). African and Coloured women leaders bear the burden of racial discrimination and experiences, whereas their counterparts can integrate into the culture and progress unencumbered (Soudien, 2008; Zanoni et al., 2010). This is an enormous duty by any standard.

Terry’s leader, a newly minted African woman leader, demonstrated the “queen bee” syndrome by acting tough and masculine towards an up-and-coming woman leader whom she had appointed (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Baykal et al., 2020; Bisson et al., 2022). It was interesting to witness the role reversal: as a White male partner, observed Terry’s exasperation and, in that instant, granted her firm psychological safety, which was both leadership and allyship (Edmondson, 1999; Townsend et al., 2024). It takes courage to speak up in an environment where the stakes are high for conflict and/or dismissiveness (Clark, 2020; Edmondson, 1999; Earthly & Cronin, 1999).

It appears that Verona's locus of control emphasised individuals' impoverished thinking rather than structural and social factors that hindered the realisation of full potential (Salter, Adams & Perez, 2018). In her assertions, Verona attributed the inability of African and Coloured women leaders to break through to their lack of agency, noting their obliviousness to invisible patterns of gendered practices at the micro, social, and historical levels that assigned unequal starting points for women in the career race (Ncube, 2018). Soudien (2008) cautions that it would be injudicious to minimise the harmful effects of racism on individuals and their ways of being in the world.

Terry had excelled in several top leadership positions across companies in a sector where her skill set was highly sought after. In one instance, she was handed a poisoned chalice: The previous managing director's hands were tied, and she decided to quit. Terry was asked to step in; she thought she could fix the inequity. Terry's experience was a classic case of a "glass cliff" (Bel et al., 2024; Boxer et al., 2017; Eagly & Carli, 2018). She could have backtracked to save her job, but instead chose to continue with the cause, regardless of the consequences. Her novel solution irritated her autocratic "boss", who told her to backtrack; she refused, and she was managed out. Her "oppressive double bind" cost her career, as she opted to leave rather than compromise her integrity. The quid pro quo was that her loss was a gain for employees whose rewards were adjusted upward (Hirji, 2021).

Both Buhle's and Terry's experiences relate to views of typical masculine and feminine roles. The players involved, African males, exhibited various inequality regimes; socio-cultural practices that reduce women, the "think manager, think man" syndrome co-existed with benevolent sexism, where Black African women are seen as incapable, need help and must be protected. Furthermore, both were held to harsher and different standards than their peers (Chadwick, 2017; Pillay et al., 2019; Prewitt, 2024; Zanoni et al., 2010).

Dashper (2019) and Dashper et al. (2024) note that repeated censure and the lack of recognition for extraordinary achievements can erode self-worth and prompt the questioning of one's abilities, thereby hindering career progression. In this study, African and Coloured women leaders also experienced microaggressions in interactions with male and some female peers, hindering their ability to realise their full potential (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Kim & Meister, 2023).

African and Coloured women leaders found the workplace harsh. As a result, they adopted different resilience strategies in their career journeys, such as working hard, finding refuge in their spirituality, speaking up, avoiding trouble, reaching out to others, seeking wisdom from books by acclaimed authors, quiet quitting, or simply exiting. Participants' self-narratives were lessons taught to them as children to help them prevail in all aspects of life and come out stronger on the other side.

It is interesting to note that the spirituality theme emerged from participants without prompting, yet workplaces are generally perceived as secular (Dik et al., 2024; Mayer, Viviers, & Oosthuizen et al., 2017). African and Coloured women leaders tended to double down on work to prove their worth. Choroszewicz and Adams (2019) define such work as hidden, and it goes unrecognised by both leaders and peers, meaning those performing it receive neither acknowledgement nor shared responsibility. Findings brought to light workplace biases and systemic barriers that undermine African and Coloured women leaders' career progression and compromise their psychosocial health. Individuals may experience increased stress and difficulty adjusting to their roles, as their efforts go unnoticed and unsupported.

5.3.3 Sub-objective 2: Organisational factors

African and Coloured participants found themselves in a double bind – damned for “avoiding politics” and put in “their place” when they spoke up. To explore ways to permanently dismantle masculine mental models, participants were asked to discuss how company culture, policies, practices, and other factors shape their career pathways within their respective organisations. To find a lasting solution to undoing power and domination, the impact of multiple identities on African and Coloured women leaders was examined within their workplace contexts (Adamson et al., 2021; Lewis, 2017; Luiz & Terziev, 2024).

Theme 3: Intransigent androcentric models shape organisational cultures

Most participants felt that their companies were ill-suited to meet societal needs, particularly regarding the representation of women leaders. This alienated women, especially those from disadvantaged groups:

So, I think, if you look in our industry, it is male-dominated; it is engineering, it is a boy's club, and for a long time, policy, processes, just ways of working, work-life balance, and all those types of things did not matter... It is challenging to convince the male species about certain things... they believe that we do the soft skills; when it comes to the hard decisions, it is their domain.

Stella (CS)

My last role was in a toxic company; outside it glitters... inside, you realise it is far from beautiful. We lost 10 to 13 leaders within 15 months, and only one person remained. There was one role I had to fill four times in a space of months... Everything was pointing to a lack of fundamentals... leaders started to leave... and you (sic) scream for help, to say "guys it is not normal"... and the organisation says, "ja, but we need to try harder..." I thought this was my cue. I cannot do it; I have tried. I do not think I can. I need to vacate this place.

Thokoza (AT)

Thokoza subsequently left her employer. Terry and Rosaria felt that a particular set of women leaders emulated tough masculine dispositions in how they spoke, treated women, and viewed women's specific needs:

I have more experience and am more qualified. I was given tasks that were low-level and intended to upset me, ultimately leading me to leave. Their communication and instructions were demeaning and disrespectful. I remember telling the White financial director to put the word "please" when sending email communication to me... she felt I was a threat and wanted ways of getting rid of me... I asked them to put a settlement agreement; it was clear that I was not wanted there.

Mmabatho (AM)

It is still a male-dominated space. I do not want to play golf, and I do not like golf; changing is not the right space for me. Psychologically, we cannot be well in such a space as women, because we must continuously be like men. I am not a man, and I do not want to be a man; it has never been a goal of mine, and I do not want to be like you. So, private sector life is very political; I know this, and it is like swallowing a bitter pill. Ja so...

Karen (CS)

You know, people are still stereotyped. Maybe thinking that women are not good enough to hold those high positions, right... It is kind of like unconscious bias... it is deliberate. You know, they exclude you, and because they believe... this is not your world. It is our world.

Enkosi (AT)

It was interesting to observe that two African women and two Coloured women were vocal about what they would and would not do. At the same time, Verona, Collette and Enkosi acquiesced

even when they disagreed with a leader's conduct. Mmabatho alluded to the fact that once women spoke out, they would be punished. In her words:

Once you become assertive and vocal, it might hurt your career growth. Other barriers include moving upwards. It is more indirect exclusions; they will exclude you from getting information about things they know you will benefit from

Mmabatho (AM)

At times, the disadvantaged groups experienced an oppressive double bind when confronted with a limited scope of options regarding what they could/ could not challenge (Bailey, 1998; Prasad, 2023). Whatever decision a leader took was accompanied by punishment.

Sub-theme 3.1: Are we ever good enough?

Some participants served despite being denigrated. Buhle and Stella alluded to women who must constantly prove to male leadership that they are good enough:

As leaders, we were anxious whenever we went to Exco... Men in the boardroom would make things difficult for you... There would be negative comments about my team. You feel like it is an Exco that wants to pull you down all the time... One day, our manager walked into my office with the CFO and a lady; all three of us reported to him. He said, You must never let this woman tell you what to do. This is my company; I built it! I was not happy with what he did, but I just smiled, asked what that was all about, and walked away.

Buhle (AS)

One of the comments that a male made was, "If you can deliver at a certain level, then you get my respect. Do not come to me and ask me to empower you when I have not seen you deliver. As soon as you get to that point, we can have a conversation.

Stella (CS)

I was well-qualified for the role, having been qualified for a long time... I was stifled, and they brought in someone from outside who lacked experience. Right? I was happy that eventually I got the role... now that I had the authority and the responsibilities... I was nervous... am I going to be able to deliver?... as women, we tend to be scared or not feel like we are good enough for higher positions... to the point that when you see opportunities being advertised, you start discouraging yourself... they are looking for somebody who has been in the role for more than 15 years. And I do not have that.

Enkosi (AS)

Certain groups, other than Blacks, were expected to talk about the environmental going green, but they were not expecting me to, they took light of it. I was passionate about the work. The branch manager's reception was lukewarm; there was low acceptance of the suggestions I made. When you are a woman, with our colour Black, it is like they do not trust us to do the work, yet if I were a White person, suggestions would have been accepted. So Black women are not trusted to do this kind of work; this is how I feel. You need to prove that you can do this.

Mmabatho (AM)

Sub-theme 3.2: Black women are held to different and higher standards

Participants found redemption in “working twice as hard” to increase their visibility and get noticed by decision-makers.

I have developed this relationship for five years, so then, I asked, but guys, what are you doing, this is my client portfolio, my fees, feedback from clients, stakeholders... what is your excuse now for not promoting me?... they heard me...

Rosaria (CT)

However, here, like all our general managers and up, are Indian. When new positions come up, they fight against each other. You end up basically working in a different department doing something you have not done before so that you can have the title... to elevate you, whereas the experience and the skill sets should speak for you... We work like 10 times as hard to be seen, basically. That is my lowest point, based on my experience, what I have achieved, and what I have seen.

Malisa (AM)

It is tough; it is not as easy. We do not get things given to us; we must work hard, twice as hard, more times hard, to be in the place that we find ourselves. The doors do not just fly open!

Collette (CM)

Years ago, I attended a future leaders programme. The presenter said that when a Black person stands up to present alongside a White man, the first thing is not about competence,

but rather, can she present? You have not opened your mouth, but you are questioned upfront. Can they do the job? You are already judged!

Terry (AT)

Sub-theme 3.3: Shackled to golden handcuffs and chairs

At times, participants were trapped in a double bind; that is, to stay and endure or to leave and be unemployed, a tenuous position to be in:

The job was below my own experience... below my capabilities. This upsets morale. So, the choice is, do I stay or leave? Do I stay for the benefits I get, or do I leave? If I had money, I would resign, but I do not... I have bills to pay, so I endure.

Mmabatho (AM)

... She is ostracised, you know, I see her pain... and that is a lot of what women deal with, we deal with pain, and you have got to guard yourself, we have bills to pay, kids to put to school.

Karen (CS)

Take it differently: I am appointed to this lucrative position as MD... perks are huge, and I start to see the wrong – what is your saviour? Your level of integrity, that is, when no title, no money defines who you are, but I will walk away, I will suffer, but I will do the right thing. How many of us can afford to do that? How many of us are employed as shells in “private sectors”, living big?

Terry (AT)

I think the bank pays, women jostle for positions, the gender pay gap is high, and there are lots of males. There are so many factors at play. Thinking about the discrepancies takes you down the road you do not want to travel; it is money, fear, pure racism; it is different.

Verona (CT)

In most instances, participants were suitably qualified but entangled in invisible chains, their voices subdued. It appears that African and Coloured women leaders must choose between quitting untenable employment conditions and losing benefits and rewards – a tricky call to make, with psychological harm either way.

Findings demonstrate the persistent burden of proof shouldered by African and Coloured women leaders, who must continually demonstrate their worth beyond the expectations set for their peers, often through having their decisions scrutinised more closely and being required to justify their qualifications in ways others are not. Paradoxically, the hardships propelled the participants to demonstrate excellence consistently to “earn” their promotability and achieve. Overall, organisational factors were shown to harm participants' well-being.

Participants experienced obstacles related to identity markers and organisational culture alignment. Essentially, they experienced strategic leadership access not because of merit, but as both organisational policies and processes were mediated by the interlocking dynamic of systemic factors recursively intersecting with race, gender, age, social capital, and other emergent intersections. This finding demonstrated that with resultant “isms” being racism, genderism, ageism and elitism, organisational fit acted as a gatekeeping mechanism in South African private sector organisations (Steyn, 2024). This finding corroborates the works of the most recent local studies conducted in the South African private sector (Forbay, 2025; Mbatha, 2023; Mnguni & Dlamini, 2025; Rajha & Ruiters, 2025; Syster et al., 2023). Insights derived from exposing such mechanisms have laid the foundation for the realisation of gender transformation through inclusive workplaces.

Discussion: Organisational factors

The private sector is expected to have a broad impact on gender transformation within and outside organisations, extending to the societies served (Cloutier, 2021; Henisz, Koller & Nuttall, 2019; CEE, 2023), yet African and Coloured women leaders representation flattens in middle leadership roles and underrepresented in strategic roles, as demonstrated in Table 1.1 (South African private sector women leadership demographics 2019–2025). To find a lasting solution to undoing power and domination, the impact of multiple identities experienced by this group was examined within their workplace contexts (Adamson et al., 2021; Lewis, 2017; Luiz & Terziev, 2024). At times, the disadvantaged groups experienced an oppressive double bind when confronted with limited options regarding what they could/ could not challenge (Bailey, 1998; Prasad, 2013). Whatever decision a leader took would incur punishment.

Private-sector workplaces have a disproportionate number of White men in top leadership positions (CEE, 2024). Certain occupations or types of work are deemed suitable for some, while others are not expected to be proficient; such behaviour epitomises the “slippery glass” phenomenon (Dashper et al., 2024). Mmabatho’s work contradicted race and gender role stereotypes (Faiz & Ozbilgin, 2025; Myeza & April, 2021), and the unanimous silence seemed a deliberate attempt by her White male clients

to negate her commendable work (Prasad, 2023). Not only was she isolated from male peers, but her underqualified manager was discourteous in her dealings. Black women must judiciously navigate the multiple identities they encounter in the workplace, being mindful of which identity to present, when to be recognised, and when to be loud or silent.

Buhle, Stella and Mmabatho's storied lives depicted toxic masculinity, erasing, belittling and deriding African and Coloured women leaders' hard work. The nature of the roles they occupied, and their performance were perceived to be incongruent with the standard expected of black women, rendering them ineligible for strategic roles. Simpson and Kumra (2016) posit that, for women to succeed in their careers, they must embody masculine norms, understand the language, and have a sense of what is required and how to behave. African and Coloured women leaders do not seem to hold such attributes. Buhle fit both benevolent sexism and the managed heart phenomenon, while Collette was unable to assert herself when belittled. The former returned ill-treatment with a smile and caring attitude, while the latter opted to pray to God to preside in her case; such responses perpetuate gendered workplaces (McCreary & Rhodes, 2001; Hochschild, 2015, 2022; Sedikides & Schlegel, 2024).

Enkosi explained that the tendency of Black women, including herself, to apologise or downplay their suggestions often stems from cultural upbringing. The findings show that some women avoided directly challenging authority figures. In these situations, they turned to Christian beliefs as a final means of support or justification for their stance. For some, invoking Christian values was seen as a last resort to defend their position; however, when this approach failed to convince those in authority, it could leave them feeling compelled to capitulate to the demands or expectations placed upon them. In this context, "capitulation" refers to reluctantly accepting a decision or situation after other attempts to assert themselves have failed (Grobler, 2014; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011).

It is said that merit does not "stick" to disadvantaged women, even when emulating the "ideal worker" norm to get noticed (Bisson et al., 2022). In both Enkosi's and Stella's experiences, women had to repeatedly prove to men that they were sufficiently qualified to be considered for mentorship, promotions, and appointments to roles for which they already qualified; until then, such opportunities were not available to them. This phenomenon, another hindrance to growth, is the Teflon effect: recognition for women does not "stick". Participants painted a harsh picture of women leaders constantly on edge, overpreparing to withstand scrutiny. African and Coloured women leaders were held to higher standards (Ncube, 2023; Showunmi, 2023). It can be surmised that psychological safety at work was absent. The lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders exhibited structural factors in this instance on account of race, gender and social capital, which resulted in workplace

treatment disproportionate to that of their White and Indian counterparts (Manganyi, 2018; Mills & Mills, 2020; Rosette, de Leon, Koval & Harrison, 2018; Smith & Nkomo, 2021).

It can be inferred that the pathway to the top was not linear for this group of women; their choices had negative consequences in either direction (Gosai et al., 2023; Hirji, 2021). Participants alluded to a punitive culture that reinforced doubt and low self-worth while shackling them to a lifestyle they had become accustomed to through generous pay (Lee, 2022). The race and gender hierarchy established during apartheid thus endures, with White men positioned at the top, followed by White women, Indian and Coloured people in that order, and Black African women at the bottom (Le Roux & Udeyemi, 2021; Manganyi, 2018; Mayiya et al., 2019; Phaswana, 2021).

Findings reveal that far fewer African and Coloured women leaders have mentors, and that even when they request mentorship, barriers to entry persist. It is challenging for Black women to find mentors, yet mentorship is a key strategy for advancing in the workplace (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Ndida & Okeke-Uzodike, 2012; Showunmi, 2023). Mentorship enables mentees to learn about roles in the corporate world as they pursue their careers and gain recognition (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Murphy, Gibson & Kram, 2024). Human resources executives would do well to structure inclusive mentorship programmes to mitigate the lack of social networks among African and Coloured women leaders.

Participant narratives were deeply entrenched and polarised within the South African history of colonialism and apartheid, resulting in the harmful “isms” of race, gender, age, social capital and other related social categories within society and at workplaces. Accordingly, the findings of the next sub-objective build on the themes, sub-themes, and storylines already discussed and present macro-factor findings in the following section.

5.3.4 Sub -objective 3: Socio–historical and legal factors

Participants were asked to critically evaluate the South African societal issues more broadly, considering the historical, political and legislative contexts and their impact on the progression of women into senior and top leadership positions.

Theme 4: Persistent apartheid (in)sensibilities – irreconcilable differences?

The Coloured women leaders observed apathy, deterioration, intra-racial envy, and the absence of activism in their communities of origin. It was felt that both private-sector and government social investment had waned:

We were brought up during the Group Areas Act, and White and Black groups never mixed. When we mixed it, it was based on a hierarchy of who is better than whom. Coloured people have always been the most looked down upon. Indian people disliked Coloured people, looked down on us... Black people see us as “bastard”... Yes, we are... but it is not... our own fault! Even the language used... is offensive... White people are in the pity space... they always pity us, they say... “we know how you feel”... It does not make sense, “you do not know how I feel, you have no idea”. They are like, “I also grew up poor... That is not true!

Karen (CS)

Unfortunately, with the Coloured people, you do not get a fair share. In Coloured communities, there is regression, drugs, family dynamics, poverty; kids do not have anything inspiring... focus is on African. There is a strong family commitment to home, and you can get good results. You have got to work to support income; we need money now, not four years after the study. With unemployment, there is a surge of pregnancies; it is just a vicious cycle.

Rosaria (CT)

Thokoza felt that if implementation was expected from White males, the quest for employment equity was rendered impossible:

The layer that is supposed to include these women is not willing... Additionally, to access the platform, some companies are intentional and very strict, insisting that Africans must fill this quota. Where I am, they were intentional about finding a Black female until they succeeded. By default, we will not attain inclusion for a long time, because we are driving an inclusion strategy while we do not have the people to include.

Thokoza (AT)

Meanwhile, there was a different take on the advantages and disadvantages of the socio-historical background and prevailing practices in the workplace:

It is easier to be a Coloured lady than an African lady. There is a level of relatedness, but in certain organisations, because of that, the African community feel that the Coloured community is not one of us; it also has different issues.

Verona (CT)

Sub-theme 4.1: “Employment equity: both a blessing and a curse”

Employment Equity (EE) policies were hailed as excellent labour legislation in South African workplaces by nine of the twelve participants:

The impact of government policy post-1994 was significant. "I am a beneficiary of awesome EE policies." We would never have gotten to the posts we have had it not been for that. Brilliant pieces of work created by the government. Forced employers to take EE seriously, I progressed well in the early years. Now, "I feel that I have plateaued on a ceiling".

Karen (CS)

I think we have sophisticated laws by far. So, I really cannot fault the laws that are there to drive transformation. The trouble is that we also have to consider the laws regarding who is supposed to implement them. Remember, in the end, the private sector in South Africa is White male-dominated; it is a fact, and it is not going to change anytime soon.

Thokoza (AT)

The critical question is, what has changed? Participants reflected:

In the early stages of my career, there were far fewer of us Black people, and they were trying to get us into the industry. My race, gender, and age worked in my favour. Employment equity was a blessing. But not anymore, now it is a curse! So yeah, Black females and Coloured females have accreditation, but they are not getting the positions, are really overlooked... especially where I am. Where is the breakdown?

Malisa (AM)

The other day, I was chatting with a Black colleague, and we both felt that if it were not for the EE law, we would not have been considered at all. They are just complying with it; it does not matter how qualified they are. If there were another way, I do not think they would; it is a compliance issue.

Mmabatho (AM)

When I started, IT was White males; there were no women. Then, later, we started to see changes. In about 2005, we began to see Black females in various roles. But the women do not have any autonomy; it is like they are placed there to tick a box.

Verona (CT)

Remnants of apartheid laws and their impact on today's society were profoundly felt by the Coloured participants as they reflected on the degradation in their communities of origin and unrelenting societal stereotypes. There was a sense of loss about what had been and about what authorities considered neglect. All of this detracted from the group's focus on their careers, as participants were saddled with a cultural tax burden. Both groups of participants felt that the implementation of the EEA ushered in great opportunities for them, only to encounter resistance and tokenism over time that hindered their progress. This theme exposed systemic factors that hinder this cohort within and outside their own groups (Collins, 2025; Ruiz et al., 2025).

Discussion: Socio–historical and legal factors

Collins (1999) argues that intersectional theorising should never be divorced from the social histories in which participants come. Houston et al. (2022) and Manganyi (2018) state that South African history is marked by a brutal past of domination and oppression of black people, whose lives were circumscribed by racial and gender hierarchy laws that institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination. It is my considered view that healing workplace divisions remains impossible as long as African and Coloured women leaders continue to occupy the lowest positions in career hierarchies (Forbay, 2025; Phaswana, 2021; Qobo & Wood, 2016). In the past, private sector organisations were subjected to apartheid state laws, and they conformed in all aspects of human resources management (Naidoo & Kongolo, 2004; Terreblanche, 2002). In the new era, laws are anchored in justice for all, not for a select few. However, implementation is divisive and perfunctory for African and Coloured women leaders (CEE, 2023; 2024; Ndida & Okeke-Uzodike, 2012; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022).

In anticipation of private sector goodwill, policymakers envisioned that once the employment equity tipping point, meaning the stage at which fair and proportional representation of all groups was present at every level of employment, had been reached, the act would no longer be relevant (DEL, 2023). This reflects the policy's conditional nature and clarifies that its existence was always intended to be temporary, contingent on the realisation of true workplace equality (Dlamini, 2022; Houston et al., 2022; Nkomo & Hooper, 2014).

Zondo et al. (2022) found that among the four racial groups in South Africa, White people opposed government employment equity policies, whereas the other groups felt these policies had significantly improved their career trajectories. Results indicate that, at some point, all women experienced a career growth boon, but only African and Coloured women leaders experienced a sharp reversal. Houston et al. (2022) argue that to date, affirmative action has, in practice, facilitated the advancement of White females into senior leadership positions at a greater rate than black females. This

outcome, they suggest, is due to the way EE policies were implemented in White male-dominated private sector organisations, where existing networks and institutional cultures tended to favour White women over their black counterparts. This assertion corroborates evidence of the importance of social networks in career advancement (Hoobler et al., 2018; Lin, 2008; Madaan & Pradham, 2017).

Likewise, Indian women's upward growth over the periods mentioned above followed White female career trendlines, albeit at slightly lower levels. Numerical EE data compiled by the Department of Employment and Labour in the CEE (2023, 2024) on private sector companies between 2019 and the first quarter of 2025 indicate noticeably accelerated rates of White female representation in middle and top leadership positions, followed by Indian females, while Coloured and Black females show stagnation in middle leadership positions. This implies that EE measures may have inadvertently perpetuated White male and female dominance within organisational leadership structures by privileging certain groups over others.

In this study, four of the Coloured women reported that the workplace had a large pool of African women, "so many African females out there". Such assertions border on "othering" this group as invaders of space (Rodríguez et al., 2025). Both Forbay (2025) and Carrim (2021) note that Indian and Coloured women leaders had to compete for the same positions against a larger pool of qualified Black counterparts. Meanwhile, White and Indian females have seen a greater increase in senior leadership representation in the private sector than their Coloured and Black counterparts, suggesting that EE measures have not fully dismantled entrenched biases within organisational cultures (CEE, 2024). It is said that the affirmative action strategy was supposed to prioritise African women over Coloured and Indian women, since African women as a group were subjected to many forms of prejudice and bias (Casale et al., 2021; Mayisa et al., 2019; Naidoo & Kongolo, 2004). Instead, in private-sector practices, African women are often at the bottom of the career ladder (Parasher, 2014; Reddy & Mncwango, 2021), and, to a certain extent, Coloured women leaders (CEE, 2023). There are information gaps among participants regarding the available talent pool of South African women in the private sector, their respective EAPs, and the proportion of each group occupying positions.

As Espi et al. (2019) found, African and Coloured women leaders frequently encounter scepticism regarding their authority, while Soudien (2008) highlights how their contributions are consistently undervalued within organisational settings. These manifest in a range of behaviours that undermine their authority and contributions; for instance, their strategic decisions are routinely second-guessed by colleagues, and their achievements are sometimes attributed to the organisation's EE targets rather than to their competence or expertise.

The emancipation of African and Coloured women leaders is analogous to political intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; King, 1988), in which the pursuit of national liberation overshadowed gender emancipation, prioritising race over gender concerns (Hassim, 1991; Phaswana, 2021).

5.3.5 Sub–Objective 4: Strategies for inclusive gender transformation

Participants were requested to suggest strategies for advancing gender transformation, devising a toolkit for aspiring women leaders, engaging with private sector organisations, and influencing government and policymakers.

Theme 5: Nuggets of information for execution

According to most participants, the EEA is an excellent piece of legislation produced by policymakers and is basically regarded as a necessity. However, some changes are needed to make it effective again. Thokoza stated that:

The legislation we have is the most sophisticated law by far, however the challenge we have is that the person who needs to execute it does not buy in, does not believe in it, and when they do it, they do so begrudgingly and are waiting for the wheels to come off the bus, guess what?... the wheels do come off the bus... the laws themselves are great; it is in the execution.

Thokoza (AT)

I would say to policy makers then that, given the current trends of stats, whether the quotas for Coloured and Black females need to be adjusted to reflect the fact that they are not progressing... I know organisations that are guided particularly for recruitment and promotions by the quota that the policy makers and the Department of Labour set.

Vicky (CS).

Sub-theme 5.1: Things I wish I had known before

All participants challenged young talent to be confident and never let classifications such as race, gender, speech, or background deter them from pursuing their aspirations. Coloured women leaders advocated for more young Coloured women to enter the private sector, as talent pipelines were either blocked or leaky. African women leaders urged young talent to overcome the compulsion toward instant gratification, articulate a vision for their futures, and work hard to realise it.

As a Coloured female, there are not enough of us, even compared to Black females, especially in leadership roles... Be bold and courageous; believe in your capabilities. Work hard to distinguish yourself from others. The fact of the matter is that as a Coloured female, you do have to work harder than White or Indian females, because there are a few of us.

Vicky (CS)

Always put your hand up for exposure, and if it is not something in your sphere, it will help you in the future. Networking is one thing I did not do in my career. Your work must speak for you; do not rely on gender/race, all of that... if there is no one of influence, by stepping out, your work starts speaking for you... Make sure you work on yourself.

Stella (CS)

Always be true to you, be guided by your values, do not be swayed to conform... know who you want to be. What do you need to do to build yourself? Continuously invest in yourself... some of these things are going to require sacrifice. Take your power back... be unapologetic for it... Find a life-work balance that works for you. Fix the imbalances. Pay it forward... converse with others who are struggling; have you improved yourself and them, piece by piece? Review what you have achieved year-end... what do you need to focus on? Fight for your dreams... You cannot feel guilty for progressing; own it.

Rosaria (CT)

Sub-theme 5.2: Make the circle bigger: beyond narrow cliques

Participants proposed various strategies for the private sector to adopt to create inclusive workplaces. It was felt that numerical goals required a review and consultation with the African and Coloured women leaders on their pain points and career aspirations:

If it were truly done as it should be, it would be 50:50, and not 20:80 or 10:90, which is my observation. In specific roles, you will not find that.

Mmabatho (AM)

As you said, there is a plateau of Coloured and Black females in middle management. Go to Coloured and Black females in middle management and ask them what they need to progress to the next level.

Vicky (CS)

Captains of industry are members of professional bodies and/or industry forums, including black women leaders who are on boards of companies and occupy top executive leadership positions in their organisations:

There are already black women's forums; the only critique is that you must come by invitation. We complained about the Boys' Club; we created the same club... could we be advocates for others? Does that have to be legislated? Not really. We also need to rethink ourselves, considering what we are not doing right when we ascend to these positions, and what is restricting us. Then it must consider the fact that you are competent, with years of experience in that space. How many boards do you sit on? Why the rotation of the same faces? To industry leaders like <high-profile names>, they are the captains of industry. Why is it that we are regressing instead of progressing when there are women who have already made their mark in the language? Do we need new forums? No, we need to review the same structures... reframe them differently. Extend, expand the network. There are numerous Black women executives with valuable content and context to share.

Terry (AT)

The appointment of the same individuals to multiple boards impedes the inclusion of capable women leaders, who may not be readily known (Huse, 2016; Rigolini & Huse, 2021). This tendency can limit upward mobility for other worthy women in top leadership who are considered for promotion, leaving them invisible. Forbay (2025) calls them “the hidden figures”, drawing on the movie by the same name.

Sub-theme 5.3: Put gender transformation on the radar

Even though the enactment of employment equity has been hailed as one of the well-developed labour laws in South Africa and even within the continent, participants felt that EEA focused on racial composition and was poor on gender representation:

Enforce equality to force organisations to consider Women of Colour for positions, and to make that effort. However, it has been helpful and necessary legislation, given our history and where we are coming from.

Vicky (CS)

I may be incorrect to say that South Africa has the best policies, but the monitoring is weak; we are reactive rather than proactive. Sometimes we are constrained by large conglomerates that bend the rules at a certain point. When they must account, they do not

enforce, to say the least. In my industry, e.g., <international companies>, do not compromise when they come to a country; they bring their own leadership. On the other side, the infrastructure capital outlay they put in a country... maybe the government sees it, and it far outweighs just putting the labour policy prescriptions, and all that...

Terry (AT)

The narratives of African and Coloured women leaders elucidated contradictions between employment equity policies and actual practices within the private sector of the supposed “rainbow nation”. In Mmabatho’s words:

... we say it is a rainbow nation; the reality is... There is still segregation. And I feel that probably it would be easy for White women to socialise with their White counterparts... It is easier to include them, rather than... a Black lady, culture-wise...

Mmabatho (AM)

Participants advanced important strategies, informed by their experiences, and hopes for better workplaces for the current and next generation of leaders. It was felt that policymakers should single out the African and Coloured groups to close the representation gap, and that effective monitoring was crucial. Meanwhile, the corporate sector's approach to employment equity benefited some but not this group. Industry leaders are urged to end workplace discrimination and demonstrate corporate citizenship and exemplary leadership. Industry bodies are seen as complicit in duplicating members-only considerations, an outdated and unfair practice if there is to be inclusive growth in the private sector.

Findings for these socio-historical and legal factors reveal that race, gender, age and social capital axes gained significant meaning only in relation to contextual factors, to produce both privilege and oppression. Considering existing intersectional studies, it is sensible to consider micro, meso, and macro systemic factors to reveal power dynamics and the systemic structures that sustain subordination and advantage (Collins, 2025; Lewis, 2017; Rodrigues et al., 2016). This sub-objective uncovered that apartheid-era contextual factors were still a strong impediment in the progression of African and Coloured women leaders into senior and top leadership roles in the private sector. On the next page, Strategies for inclusive gender transformation are presented in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3: Strategies for inclusive gender transformation

Theme	Put Gender Transformation on the Radar	Make the Circle Bigger: Beyond Narrow Cliques		Things I Wish I had Known Before
		CEO & Executive Boards	HR Directors, Women's Forums	
Start to	→ Prioritise gender transformation → Clearly define gender targets for the private sector → Publish private sector excellence on inclusive gender transformation → Strengthen monitoring of employment equity implementation	→ Create more jobs for inclusive development → Inclusive succession plans → Disaggregate data to unpack why African and Coloured women leaders are invisible → Ask them what they want → Big picture orientation on gender transformation → Embrace the spirit and letter of transformation → Target gender ratio of 50:50	→ Diagnose African and Coloured women's opportunity gaps, be deliberate about tailored pathways → Extend the network, expand membership to other executive women leaders who have content and context → Be on the side of fair practices → Take a stand, point out anomalies → Develop transformative strategies for business	→ Believe in your capabilities → Put your hand up → Let your work speak for you → Work harder than White or Indian females; there are far fewer of us → Build and seek networks quite early → Pay it forward
Stop	→ Weak monitoring → Leaving business to set targets → Being constrained by conglomerates that bring their own leadership, squeezing out local talent → Prioritise race at the expense of gender → Neglect of Coloured communities	→ Tick a box compliance → Exclusive practices → Racial apartheid hierarchy → Ignoring microaggressions → Rotation of the same elite faces on boards → The working poor notion → People's rhetoric, slogans	→ Creating a "girls club" → Exclusive membership	→ Do not be swayed to conform → You cannot feel guilty because of your progress → Drop instant gratification
Keep	→ Enforcement and monitoring of EE implementation → Review of targets → Sophisticated EE policy	→ Meaningful corporate social investment → Transformational goals of yesteryears → Partnership with all spheres of government → Beyond symbolic gestures	→ Developing and mentoring talent across the employee career cycle → Mentor young talent	→ Sense of curiosity → Continuous development

Discussion: Strategies for inclusive gender transformation

Nine of the twelve participants commended employment equity as the best labour legislation for transformation; however, application and enforcement were below par. African, Coloured and Indian men and women were appointed to meaningful leadership roles during the first five years ($n = 5$) of affirmative action implementation. However, White males performed even better than before (Naidoo & Kongolo, 2004; Philip & Van Rooyen, 2001), as this study's findings affirm. Over time, the EEA's impact eroded, and selective affirmative action ensued, resulting in stagnation for African and Coloured women leaders at their current occupational levels (Houston et al., 2022; Gradin, 2019; Phaswana, 2021).

The aftereffects of segregation laws in South Africa are still felt in pay differentials and the career immobility of the African group, especially African women (Casale et al., 2021; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022) and, to a degree, Coloured women (Casale et al., 2021; Leibbrandt et al., 2010). EEA compliance in the South African private sector is selective, as both White and Indian women leaders have continued to make headway into senior and top leadership roles since inception (CEE, 2023). Insufficient monitoring by the Department of Employment and Labour inadvertently enabled the private sector to obstruct African and Coloured women leaders' career progression. There was a perceived lack of emphasis on gender transformation compared to racial redress (Parashar, 2014). The immobility of African and Coloured women leaders is analogous to political intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991, 2013; King, 1988), wherein the political liberation agenda prioritised race (Hassim, 1991; Phaswana, 2021).

The enactment of the EE Act through affirmative action is a means of remedying historical imbalances in South African employer practices and policies that disadvantaged designated groups, albeit to varying degrees of prejudice (CEE, 2023). Race remains the medium through which power and subordination are re-constituted. The application of the EE Act is not only a matter of attaining parity and subsequent social justice, but also a moral imperative if social cohesion is ever to be achieved in South Africa (Dlamini, 2022; Matotoka & Okeke, 2021; Nkomo & Hoolbler, 2014).

The strategies put forward by participants answer the question, "what is to be done?" Participants imparted strategies to effect gender transformation for consideration by various stakeholders and provided feedback on areas for improvement in policy-making, private-sector people management policies and practices, an organisational development blueprint, and a career pathing guideline for women in leadership and aspiring young talent. Table 5.3 (Strategies for gender transformation) uses the stop, start and keep framework.

5.3.6 Unexpected Findings

While there were many commonalities within and across the two groups of women leaders, some narratives stood out and/or apart. It was interesting to discover participants whose language use and expression sounded strong and out of the ordinary, and findings that were contrary to both my preconceived ideas and those of their social identity group. This made the participants somewhat concerned outliers.

Both Collette and Enkosi stated:

"I keep the taste of poverty so close to me; it drives me to work hard"

Collette (CM)

"It has always looked like a sin to be Black!"

Enkosi (AS)

Both were expressions that drove the point home and articulated the gravity of the prejudice the two women leaders faced in the workplace. I found the words and expressions to be starkly different from my private-sector experience. I had never heard heartfelt feelings phrased that way before. Such assertions would be lost or overlooked by interventions that address only surface-level workplace issues rather than structural factors (Adesina et al., 2025; Steinfield et al., 2019; Syster et al., 2023). Collette reminds herself of the consequences of not toeing the line by self-sanctioning and muting her voice, in her words:

I am a believer... I do not have to be aggressive; you try to see the good in people and give them the benefit of the doubt... In the current situation... I have been told, "No, you must speak up for yourself," and I am like, "The Lord will fight for me."

Collette (CM)

Collette was inadvertently hindering her career path and endangering her psychological health (Benbow et al., 2026; Faiz & Ozbilgin, 2025; Myeza & April, 2021). Moreover, theories like diversity and inclusion minimise the persistence of racism (Mbatha & Ruiters, 2024; Nkomo, 2021; Steyn, 2024). In this context, the intersectional lens has the power to lift the spiderweb cloak and expose hidden structural discrimination that marginalises women leaders (Collins, 2025; Moorosi & Shownmi, 2025; Sim & Bierama, 2025).

One of the women leaders, while reflecting on the effects of socio-cultural and legal factors and identities, pronounced:

“I think that for me, ... I mean in the workplace, and I am not trying to sound, ... I do not see colour, I see a family, perhaps I have been there for a long time. If a guy says no to my budget ask, and I link it to it, it is because ... it actually blocks me. The hindrance is fixation on colour and linking rejection to colour”.

Verona (CT)

It appears that Verona had internalised the discriminatory practices and narratives in the work environment. I thought that, at the participant's level, her education, work experience in the private sector, her lived experiences through the era of apartheid, and the new dispensation as a Coloured woman meant that prejudice would be visible to her. This data is consistent with the suggestion that black people at times experience cognitive dissonance with their race and identities (Cowan, Neighbors, de la Moreaux & Behnke, 2008; Lizzio – Wilson et al., 2021; Myeza and April, 2021).

Verona further suggested that African and Coloured women needed to work on themselves to break free from the entanglements of poverty thinking and ascend the corporate ladder on merit. It appeared that the participant was oblivious of the existence of systemic structural factors that hinder women in the workplace (Collins, 2015, 2020; Mbele, 2016; Salter et al., 2018). Beddoe and Cooker (2025) describe colour blindness as concealment used by advantaged groups to ease guilt and to negate transformation programmes aimed at redressing past imbalances. Notably, extant literature tends to attribute colour blindness solely to White groups and neo-liberalised black and white leaders in the private sector who dispense the task of transformation to the capitalist market forces (Mbele, 2016; Steyn, 2024). Understanding what racism is and is not, and responding to it effectively, is a burden that marginalised people must reckon with in their daily lives to avoid confrontation (Mbele, 2016). It could also be that Verona had assimilated the virtues of meritocracy.

In this study, four Coloured women participants reported a distinct experience of invisibility and subsequent impediments to upward mobility due to their smaller numbers compared to their African counterparts. I was taken aback by this attribution, as I subscribed to the EEA aim of matching the EAP share as closely as possible. The country is reeling from a past that was mainly divided along race and gender fault lines. Separatist attitudes such as the Black menace were created to cause fear amongst South Africans who were in the minority - the “swart gevaar” feelings of being swamped by the Black majority (Kapp, 2026; Wonci, 2025). It seems that the “Black menace” is enduring in the workplace

and deflects attention from the true reasons for career stagnation for the Coloured women leaders. The lived experiences of the African and Coloured women leaders in this study are deeply rooted in apartheid (in)sensibilities, and some differences remain irreconcilable.

Additionally, it was revealed that phenotypes and texturism advantaged some, while disadvantaging darker Coloured women and African women (Houston et al., 2022; Le Roux & Odeyemi, 2021; Tewolde, 2024). This proved that African and Coloured women leaders should not be treated as a monolithic group, as the findings revealed intra- and intergroup differences (Forbay, 2025; Myeza & April, 2021). This affirms the assertion that intersecting identities may be experienced differently by women, regardless of their shared race, gender, and other identity markers.

One of the participants, Terry, a new employee at the time, was given a work task by her leader, without any standards or rules outlining what was to be done:

When I had problems, it was through the efforts of women leaders that I was able to overcome them. I had just joined; there was a tender I needed to submit, and she just gave it to me ...” I was swamped”.

Terry (AT)

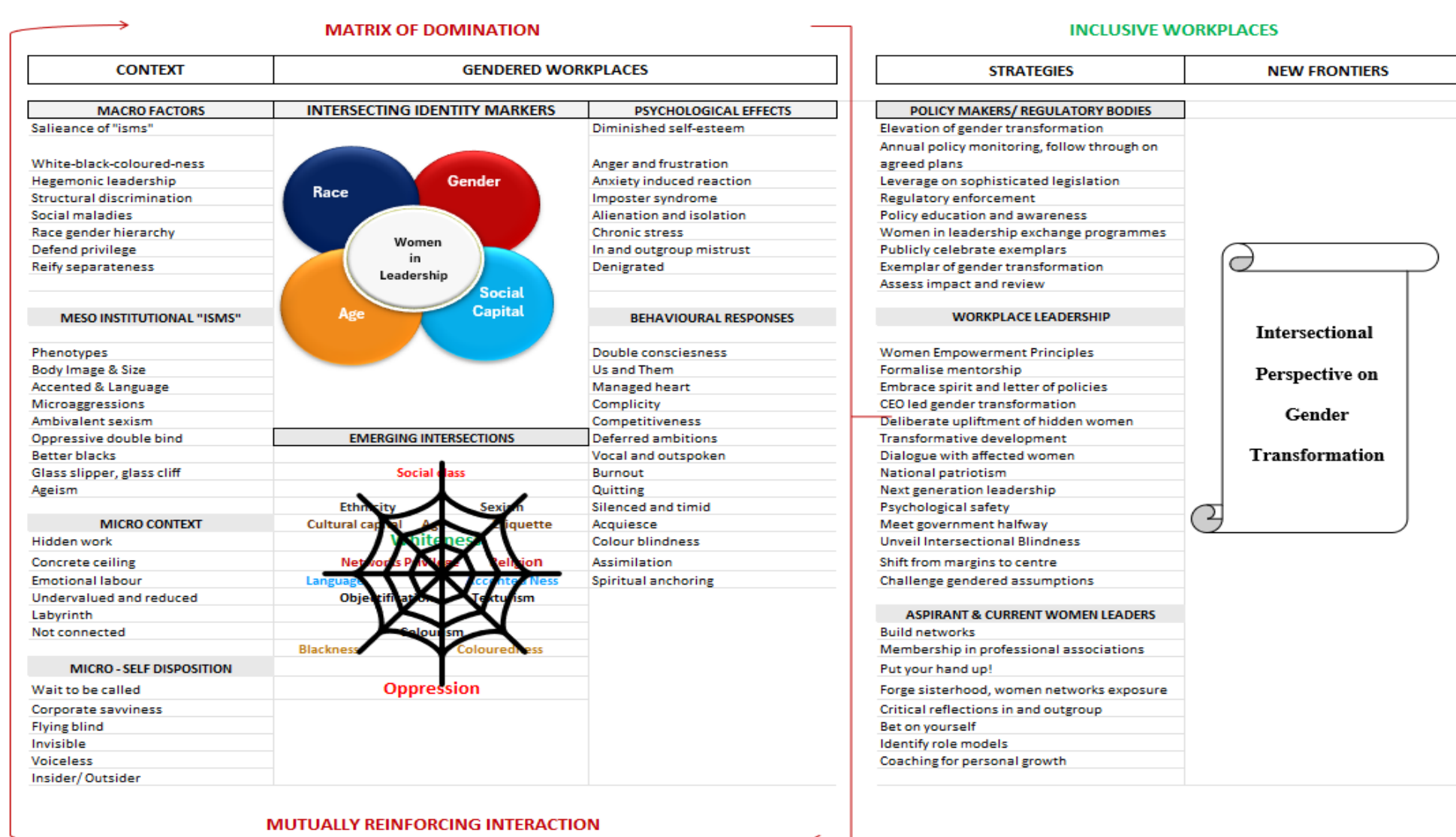
According to Terry, she spent late hours on several days wrestling with what to do, only to be told by her manager that it was just a workplace prank. What is peculiar about this incident is that her manager was a Black African female, while the White male senior partner who was a bystander took notice and intervened. There was a power imbalance between Terry and her manager, and psychological safety was threatened (Clark, 2020; Nielsen, Finne, Parven & Einarsen, 2022); essentially, she had crossed the manager-subordinate professional line, causing her distress. Mizrahi (2003) and Cowan et al. (1998) argue that when women harass other women at work, they are motivated by envy of peer success and unhealthy competitive spirit, thus undermining the progression of women. Meanwhile, Dilli (2025) and Hanek and Garcia (2022) attribute hostility toward women to their nonconformity with stipulated societal gender roles. On both accounts, Terry’s circumstances were slightly different; she was subordinate, new to the role, and had not yet established herself. It appears that gender roles were not in contention, but rather that she was belittlingly treated by her manager. This proves that some women assimilate in a masculine culture to fit in, only to encounter male counterparts who go against the grain of alienating organisational norms.

5.4 TOWARDS INCLUSIVE GENDER TRANSFORMATION: AN INTERSECTIONAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

The final objective of the study was to develop an intersectional framework for inclusive gender transformation within private sector organisations. Participant feedback provided insights into the perplexing shortage of African and Coloured women in senior and top leadership positions within South African private-sector organisations, thereby informing the development of the Intersectional Career Development Framework (ICDF). The ICDF illustrates how existing concepts within South African private-sector organisations intersect, resulting in the invisibility of African and Coloured women leaders at strategic occupational levels.

The ICDF exposes the interlocking of race, gender, age and social capital in South African private sector companies. Unforeseen social categories emerged from African and Coloured women leaders' narratives, reinforcing the effects of domination and subordination as depicted in the web of intersectionality. The workplace is gendered, exhibiting not only gendered symbols of how a "proper" woman leader should look and act but also modern prejudice and a dominant organisational culture. Such practices and norms create feelings of inferiority among women and hinder African and Coloured women leaders. The psychological effects on participants in this study are disclosed, along with their coping strategies to advance gender transformation at each contextual level. Figure 5.2 below illustrates the Intersectional Career Development Framework.

Figure 5.2: Intersectional Career Development Framework



5.5 INTERSECTIONAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Figure 5.2 above presents the Intersectional Career Development Framework (ICDF), which integrates themes and subthemes from the narrative and dialogic analyses of lived experiences reflected in participant data. The cornerstones of the ICDF are the matrix of domination and inclusive workplaces, supported by the vertical pillars of social context, intersecting identity markers, and resultant advantage or subordination. The next pillar offers strategies for achieving gender transformation through an intersectional lens.

The social context is broken down into multiple layers, including macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors, the gendered character of the workplace, and the resultant effects of power and suppression. The macro lens comprises socio-historical factors such as the apartheid legacy, policies that led to disparities, including unequal access to education, a polarised society along social categories, and a society in transition (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Phaswana, 2021; Terreblanche, 2002). Meso factors emanate from and are influenced by macro factors and are expressed at the organisational level through the prevailing culture, determining what is obscure and who is visible, who is valued, and who is not. (hooks, 2000a; Steinfield., 2019). Micro factors are embodied in interactions with others in the workplace, and one's stance, sense of worth, and agency, in pursuit of hoped-for futures, are expressed at this level. The vertical macro, meso, and micro factors, on their own, do not suffice.

Across the vertical axis of social contextual factors are intersecting Venn diagrams of identity markers, such as race, gender, age, and social capital, which exacerbate one another, shaping differing experiences and relations to power. Moreover, identity markers, in turn, interlock with socio-historical power asymmetries and institutionalised hegemonic cultures, shaping gendered workplaces (Collins, 1990). The interlocking of identity markers with macro and meso factors brings about a persistent yoke of racial hierarchy, hybrid identities, othering and multiply marginalising the women leaders in focus. The framework shows how intersectionality regenerates and reflects the intricacies of intersecting identity markers that interlock with larger structural forces of domination, which exacerbate and recur within the bracketed area, with ensuing oppression and privilege. Meanwhile, the commanding group is interested in maintaining the status quo, as it benefits from power and representation.

The consequences of an oppressive workplace include subordination, which manifests as impostor syndrome, as evidenced by behavioural responses under the psychological effects pillar. The cycle of overlapping identities repeatedly reinforces and reproduces domination and subordination, creating a recursive loop as shown by the arrows, which interacts with the environment, forming new experiences. The recursive interlocking produces racism, sexism, ageism, and elitism. The ICDF

uncovered other associated identity markers and/or emergent intersections, cloaked underneath the spider web, metaphorically referred to as the web of intersections. The centre of the intersectionality web represents proximity to power, and hence visibility to key decision-makers and subsequent access to important information. Meanwhile, the wider the radius, the closer they are to the periphery, oppressed and marginalised. Emergent intersections stem from narratives shared by participants that reveal who is continually at the periphery and who is at the centre of strategic discourse. For instance, women with atypical bodies, language, accents, darker hues, and less connected remained marginalised with stunted careers. Meanwhile, a woman leader with a lighter skin tone and silky hair had some respite on that account and was therefore closer to the centre, though not entirely. The web of intersectionality is itself fluid; some locations are not permanent. The goal of this inquiry was to make the cloaked Black African and Coloured women leaders visible by giving them a voice.

The ICDF does not end at the intersection of identity markers and social context; rather, it advances transformative solutions. Inclusive workplaces, coded in green, represent glimmers of hope through strategies to improve the lived experiences of marginalised women leaders. Strategies are proposed to address structural factors, thereby creating a space for subordinate women leaders to ascend beyond mid-level leadership. As for private sector executive leadership and industry bodies' recommendations for equitable workplace practices, as well as tips for aspiring women leaders. In this case, key factors identified in the findings are put forward to address inequalities, including hierarchies; the enforcement and monitoring of employment equity; organisational policies and practices; succession; the development and distribution of resources; and personal and interpersonal-level interventions to support African and Coloured women leaders. The lived experiences of participants in the ICDF enable women in leadership to seek mentorship support and structured development while allowing them to voice concerns that are often dismissed or taken lightly. Finally, a toolkit that uses intersectional approaches to enable career-ready, aspiring young women leaders to navigate the corporate world has been developed. Intersectionality is the new frontier for years to come.

5.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The data revealed complex ingroup and outgroup positionalities, as well as differential effects of the simultaneous presence of simultaneously held social identity categories. The beginnings of disparities within organisations were associated with women and, later, Black people (Terreblanche, 2002; Syed & Ozbilgin, 2009). Shared narratives laid bare a gendered culture that erased most and recognised a few in strategic roles (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Forbay, 2025; Tshenyego, 2023). Due to limited access to social networks, African and Coloured women leaders found themselves bereft of key information and of connections who could endorse them at work (D'Este et al., 2025; Hoobler

et al., 2018; Rigolini & Huse, 2021). Coloured women leaders expressed ambiguity about their identities and concerns about their absence from the private sector (Du Bois & Marable, 2015; Forbay, 2025; Pirtle, 2023; Tewolde, 2024). Black African women were kept at the bottom of the food chain due to race, gender and social class (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021; Mayiya et al., 2021; Ndida & Ndhlovu, 2022; Phaswana, 2021). They felt prejudged and held to a higher standard than their peers. Language and accents were used to categorise speakers' age, race, social class and ethnicity (Prasad, 2023). South Africa is multilingual, and yet the inability to speak English fluently by non-English Black speakers is judged negatively. African and Coloured women leaders adopted various strategies for resilience in their career journeys, including working hard, embracing spirituality, speaking up, seeking wisdom from leadership books, avoiding trouble, quitting, or simply exiting.

In conclusion, the invisibility of African and Coloured women leaders in senior roles is not imaginary; it is real and was profoundly felt by participants. Intersectionality is at times viewed with scepticism and silenced by the privileged; this is folly. The lens showed blind privilege against daily microaggressions that African and Coloured women leaders experienced in the workplace. It is prudent for African and Coloured women leaders to avoid entanglement in the apartheid web of intersectionality and instead advocate for critical self-reflection alongside Indian and White women in the service of gender transformation (April et al., 2007; Booyse & Nkomo, 2010). Meaningful allyship and sisterhood could be catalysts for the upward mobility of talented African and Coloured women leaders, thereby multiplying their advantages and inclusivity. Sisterhood, necessary for the evolution of feminism, can be achieved only when women disengage from hostility, jealousy, and competition with one another that have kept us vulnerable, weak, and unable to envision new realities (hooks, 1981:154).

In this chapter, the findings for each of the five objectives were presented through key narrative themes and sub-themes. Each theme was discussed in the context of existing literature. Participants suggested strategies for consideration by young women aspiring to leadership roles in private-sector organisations and beyond, related industry forums, and ultimately government policymakers. The themes and sub-themes addressed all research objectives except the sixth. The sixth objective culminated in the development of an Intersectional Career Development Framework, fulfilling the final objective. The ICDF was constructed to enable all key stakeholders to effect meaningful gender transformation through an intersectional lens. The next chapter covers the conclusions and recommendations of this study.

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to examine why African and Coloured women leaders plateaued in mid-level roles and were subsequently underrepresented in senior and top leadership positions within South African private- sector organisations. To investigate this phenomenon, the research objectives examined the recursive effects of race, gender, age, and social capital on contextual factors at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. The study also explored strategies to counter the axes of domination and subordination, using intersectionality as a lens. This chapter revisits the research design, restates both the knowledge and practice gaps, and presents an overview of the findings. The study's theoretical and practical contributions are then presented. The chapter also highlights the study's limitations and offers suggestions for future research. Before the conclusions, I reflect on my own experiences during the doctoral journey.

This study was underpinned by the interpretivist philosophy and adopted an inductive approach. Narrative inquiry was employed as a research strategy. Twelve African and Coloured women leaders in middle, senior, and top leadership were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Spontaneous conversations that ensued between the participants and me during interviews, along with the participants' very personal accounts, yielded deep insights and enabled the co-construction of meaning. The exploration of participants' narratives was systematic, employing both thematic and dialogic analyses.

6.1.1 Overall findings

Overall findings revealed shared lived experiences, discordant career narratives, and overlapping yet divergent coping strategies. In environments where some are elevated and others erased, participants tended to exhibit self-censorship and internalised inadequacies, attributing these to modest upbringings and, in some instances, rural backgrounds. Findings showed that socio-historical remnants of apartheid continued to foster a divide-and-rule system that privileges proximity to whiteness. The Coloured women leaders' refrain was the influx of African women in the workplace, which was perceived as hindering their progress, almost borrowing from the apartheid “*swart gevaar*” meaning “Black danger and/or Black threat and menace”, a term that was used to portray the Black African majority as a threat (Posel, 2014). In the same vein, Coloured women leaders withstood colourism and texturism, which sowed intra- and intergroup divisions to the extent of breaking up families (Erasmus, 2001; Forbay, 2025). The in-between-ness experienced by this group emanated from a cruel twist of history, in which the manipulation of birth circumstances enforced oppressive structures. None of the

African and Coloured women leaders entered the corporate world through social networks, leaving them without influential advocates to support their career trajectories. Most of the time, alienating hegemonic private-sector cultures created women leaders who felt harshly judged, undermined, and made invisible compared to their counterparts and were constantly on tenterhooks to prove their worth. Dominant masculinity overwhelmed this group, leaving them feeling like misfits and incompetent. Participants responded to discrimination in multiple ways. While some women leaders found solace in faith, others spoke out regardless of the consequences. Some participants kept their heads down to avoid trouble and worked twice as hard, whereas others disengaged or quit outright. Participants shared meaningful strategies for consideration by other women leaders, up-and-coming talent, industry leaders, and policymakers. It was interesting to observe the tremendous sense of responsibility that participants showed towards the next generation of African and Coloured women leaders, with the hope that their experiences would improve. At the same time, some women leaders bemoaned what they considered a sense of entitlement and desire for instant gratification among young people.

6.1.2 Knowledge and practice gaps

Research on how the multiple identities of African and Coloured women leaders are conceptualised and constituted within the multi-layered contexts of South African private sector organisations remains limited (Forbay, 2025; Forbay & Mnguni, 2024). Local intersectional studies focused on race, gender, and social class as identity markers, overlooking contextual factors in their investigations (Dlamini, 2013; Ncube, 2018; Mbatha, 2025). However, this omission could have amplified understanding of the complex web of relationships between identity markers and power dynamics, which are crucial for developing impactful and workable strategies. There is also a paucity of studies that include age (Forbay, 2025; Reygan et al., 2025; Tshenyego, 2023) and social capital as important identity markers in gender transformation (D'Este et al., 2025; Ferris et al., 2019; Galavotti & Cantoni, 2025). Age is an important factor in organisational succession planning, talent pipelines, and progression (Lin & Chen, 2021; Vilela & Casado, 2023). Most studies in the private sector examine why women leaders are not promoted to senior leadership roles; none investigate reasons why women leaders plateau in mid-level leadership (Lewis, 2017). This inquiry closed this knowledge gap. Methodologically, this study is among the few intersectional studies to use narrative inquiry as a research strategy.

The underrepresentation of African and Coloured women leaders in senior roles within private sector organisations diminishes their influence in strategic decision-making. The golden skirts phenomenon, in which a few high-profile African and Coloured women leaders are recycled onto various company boards and given media exposure, is unhelpful. It serves to conceal the reality of slow

gender transformation within South African private corporations. Diversity and inclusion programmes have also failed to recognise and address the complexity of the unique lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders. This is due to the interlocking axes of domination and subordination. At a policy level, the Employment Equity Act (EEA) treats women as a homogeneous group (Forbay, 2025). Furthermore, workplace initiatives such as diversity and inclusion often focus on the number of women rather than on their lived experiences, thereby diluting the spirit and intent of the EEA. Current diversity and inclusion programmes prioritise numerical representation to meet targets, ignore actual lived experiences of different groups of women, and disproportionately benefit White and Indian women.

6.2 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This study was informed by the persistent stagnation of African and Coloured women leaders in middle leadership ranks and their conspicuous underrepresentation in senior and top leadership roles compared to their White and Indian counterparts. This issue has eluded policymakers for years (CEE, 2023, 2024). The study's findings contribute theoretically, methodologically, and to research practice and policy making on gender transformation in South Africa.

6.2.1 Theoretical contribution

The primary contribution to this study is the Intersectionality Career Development Framework (ICDF) for gender transformation in corporate South Africa. This study is among the few that address the under-theorisation of the lived experiences of Coloured women leaders in South African private sector companies employing an intersectional lens (Forbay, 2025; Ncube, 2018), albeit in combination with their African peer group. In South African private-sector organisations, black (African, Coloured, and Indian) women are often studied as a group, yet their experiences are varied (Lewis, 2017; Syster et al., 2025). At the time of writing this thesis, none of the local studies reviewed singled out these two groups' lived experiences of stagnation in mid-level leadership ranks at once in the private sector. The epistemology of this study rejects aggregation and demonstrates intra- and intergroup lived experiences among the twelve women studied.

There is a lack of scholarly research examining social capital as an identity marker, yet it is a key determinant in unlocking growth opportunities and visibility for talent with reciprocal relationships with influential leaders in the private sector. This study reveals that the cohort's dearth in senior and top leadership positions is not only structural but also hidden, shrouded beneath a web of intersectionality in layered contexts. The intersection of social capital with race, gender and age conceals the mechanisms of policy exclusion. There is a strong association between career advancement and the accumulation of social connections.

Age as a social category in either the private or public sectors is scarce. Age is consistent with the career life cycle model; any misalignment remains unexplained (Super, 1980, 2020). In this study, preliminary findings suggested that age had an impact, though this was one-sided due to the absence of employees in the South African youth age range. Grounded in Black feminist epistemology and inductive research, the ICDF gives voice to the lived experiences of African and Coloured women leaders, situating these experiences in their personal and interpersonal relationships, families of origin, workplace cultures, and socio-historical factors. The ICDF is poised to guide organisational leadership and human resources towards attaining truly inclusive workplaces.

6.2.2 Methodological contribution

Business leadership studies that use narrative inquiry as a strategy are rare, particularly in South Africa. Furthermore, South African studies seldom use the combination of narrative inquiry and intersectionality (Chadwick, 2017). And yet, as shown in this study, a narrative design can untangle how intersections operate in private-sector human resources practices such as promotions, succession, exposure opportunities to key decision-makers, and intersectional design will enable visibility of African and Coloured women leaders. This inquiry contributes to qualitative research by demonstrating how the combination of narrative inquiry and intersectionality can be applied to reveal women leaders trapped within the web of intersectionality, as evidenced by the ICDF's emerging intersections.

In most qualitative studies, thematic analysis is commonly applied for data analysis. The methodological contribution of this study is the application of both thematic and dialogic narrative analyses. The former emphasises what stories are told, while the latter centres on how stories are told, thereby enhancing real-time collaboration between participants and the researcher, as evidenced by the vignettes and researcher reactions in the field (Esin, 2011; Frost, 2021; Riessman, 2008; Rosenberg, 2019). The intersectional lens and narrative blocks enabled a coding process that examined the whole story or storyline with emerging patterns, intra- and inter-relationship dynamics, institutional encounters, and socio-historical nuances, rather than a singular line-by-line approach. The expression of observational data through vignettes captured single moments that revealed the mood and collaborative interactions between participants and me in the field (Agostini et al., 2024). The vignettes offer the reader a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences, thereby reinforcing rigour through transferability (Mackey et al., 2026; Marshall et al., 2022).

6.2.3 Contribution to policy and practice

Empirically, data are from an underrepresented group in datasets, revealing the web of intersectionality in the private sectors of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. The paucity of African and

Coloured women leaders in senior and top leadership roles is not just a talent pipeline blockage; employment equity policies consider White and Indian women and all black men as a representation of all women, thereby erasing the experiences of African and Coloured women as unique groups.

The women leaders in question get lost in the EEA's numerical composition, diversity, and inclusion; consequently, they are neither seen as senior nor as having executive potential by industry captains. This study interrupts the erasure of this group, which is currently couched in positivists' compositional headcounts, private-sector EEA annual reports, and gender-diversity dashboards. Foregrounding African and Coloured women leaders' accounts as primary data, rather than as a one-liner in an EEA report, to explain and supplement numerical targets, contributes to methods for revealing talent at the periphery of the web of intersections. In this inquiry, the voices of this group, through their stories, are brought to the centre, the strategic discourse

Based on the findings of this study, local private sector organisations provide a rich setting for applying the ICDF as an analytical tool, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of the social categories that influence career progression and the workplace experiences of marginalised groups. The ICDF captures how participants buckled under the weight of alienating work environments and a lack of recognition for working far harder than their counterparts to prove their worth, all the while being rendered invisible. Such experiences could create fault lines in inter- and intragroup relations in the workplace, leaving remnants of a painful past.

Another important contribution of the study was its highlighting of storytelling as a leadership tool (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Stark, Reif & Schiebeler, 2021; van de Mierop et al., 2021). It became evident during interviews that research conversations were not just anecdotes but data showing how power operates in organisations through the combination of identity markers within a multilayered context. During the interviews, the healing power of stories became evident, and the emotional toll borne by participants was temporarily lifted. The narrative research design is seldom applied in the private-sector workplace, yet more organisations are inclined to use storytelling as a method of inquiry (Ghanbar et al., 2024). This underscores the need for corporate leadership to create safe spaces for sharing stories; applying narrative inquiry is pertinent.

This inquiry dispels the skills and experience scarcity refrain used to discount African and Coloured women leaders' talent in strategic succession planning, arguing that there are more reasons for human resources, chief executives, and industry body leaders to listen harder than to exclude this group. Their inclusion unblocks the talent pipeline for this cohort at all levels, including the next generation. This has the potential to promote social cohesion in otherwise politically sensitive South

African organisations. The findings amplified the voices of marginalised women leaders in the private sector and advanced employment equity and intersectionality in practice.

The ICDF offers practice-based regulatory frameworks that stress the importance of effective monitoring mechanisms for policymakers and serve as analytical tools and strategic knowledge frameworks for the private sector. The framework is timely, with the Minister of Employment and Labour announcing a review of the EEA target-setting process in local industries, effective from 31 March 2026 (CEE, 2026). The offering to the Department of Labour and Employment includes both an answer and a practical strategy to address a persistent challenge. Specifically, it explains why African and Coloured women leaders plateau in mid-level leadership in South African corporations and offers actionable steps to overcome these barriers. The recommended actions are stipulated below:

- Re-educating senior leadership in the private sector, industry bodies, practitioners and people management professionals on the purpose of the EEA and the mechanisms for its attainment.
- Developing targeted strategies to achieve proportionate representation of the underrepresented groups.
- Clarifying the rationale for the EEA, which extends beyond compositional representation and economic benefits and is the soul of organisational existence in a society reeling from past maltreatment and a gendered world of work.
- Providing an opportunity for the private sector to critically reflect, drawing on relevant constructs to develop frameworks for deeper engagement.

The ICDF equips talented up-and-coming women with the skills to understand the workplace ecosystem and the interconnectedness among people, technical skills, systems, and the environmental context. This inquiry provides organisational development practitioners with a methodology for investigating blocked talent pipelines. The ICDF delivers value to the Department of Employment and Labour, top leadership decision-makers in the private sector, including human resources practitioners, employment equity consultants, and young and mature women themselves, as intended by the call for employment equity and the furtherance of truly inclusive workplaces.

6.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has five contextual exclusions and methodology-related limitations. Firstly, the experiences of women who are either gender non-binary or living with disability were not included (Forbay, 2025; Luiz & Terziev, 2022; Reygan et al., 2022). Secondly, disability is a key concern for policymakers whose mandate is to achieve employment equity across all spheres of society. Narrating the lived experiences of this group could close the knowledge and practice gaps and increase the

visibility of people living with disabilities. Thirdly, although age is a social category of investigation, the sample excluded African and Coloured women leaders younger than 30, who may currently be in supervisory, first-line leadership, or specialist roles and be affected by the blocked middle-management pipeline. This level represents the next generation of middle and/or professionally qualified leaders. Fourthly, the study was limited to Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, which curtailed the applicability of findings and failed to capture the diversity of perspectives across the other seven South African provinces. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of this study meant it could not track developments in the careers of African and Coloured women leaders over time, as a longitudinal study could.

6.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several implications in this study must be acknowledged. This study initially intended to include people living with disabilities. Attempts to contact them, however, were unsuccessful. One participant was not sure whether her chronic illness was classified as a disability or not. The rest declared that they did not live with a disability. A potential participant referred through snowball sampling declined to participate. It was sensible then to discard disability as an identity category. The refusal to participate seemed to convey a “nothing about us, without us” message (Franits, 2005). In acknowledging the risk of being a spokesperson for others, future research on disability as a social category is urgent and perhaps needs investigation by women leaders living with a disability. Researchers without disabilities could share their observations as they strive to engage with this group.

While age was one of the social categories in the current study, only participants aged 37 or older were included in the sample. Younger participants were excluded because it was assumed they lacked the requisite leadership experience. Consequently, older participants tended to speak on behalf of younger women leaders. Future studies could replicate this inquiry with employees younger than 35 years, including first-line leaders and/or individual contributor-equivalent peers. Such a group would augment the current analysis of age as a social category in the workplace. Future research could also investigate the intersection of age and current identity markers across career life-cycle stages to understand the relationship between age and the timing of career progression. This would illuminate the impact of age on upward mobility in the private sector. More research on language, accents, and generations as markers of identity is required.

South Africa's racial history has provincial nuances, and future research would benefit from exploring these nuances. The other provinces, namely the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape, the Free State, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, the North West, and the Northern Cape, were excluded. It is proposed that, through transferability, other researchers could apply the findings and depth of the ICDF to other

South African provinces and the private sector, thereby deepening existing knowledge of this cohort's lived experiences beyond the scope of this study.

Future research could also trace threads of identity markers in relation to systems of oppression over time, either within the same group of women and assess whether their career journeys have shifted and/or are shifting. By virtue of the three-dimensional framework of narrative inquiry, which also includes the past, the future and the present time, participants in this study could be invited to reflect on successive episodes of their lived experiences post-current study in the private sector through a longitudinal study (Mackey et al., 2026; Perrin et al., 2023). A succession tracker would be a good indicator of participant movements, even with lateral but meaningful assignments (Dilli, 2025; Perrin et al., 2025; Super, 2020). The current sample size is rather small for a future study; it might be a limitation, and some women leaders might no longer be available. Alternatively, future studies could identify a different sample of African and Coloured women leaders using the same criteria and comparing them, perhaps in five to seven years' time from 2024, when the interviews were conducted. This might enable a cohort comparison and a measure of inclusive workplaces.

In this study, gender was treated as binary, consistent with the EEA gender categories. It would be interesting to broaden the definition of gender to include non-binary African and Coloured leaders from the private sector. It is worth noting that Coloured men are underrepresented at only the top leadership levels, while Black African men are underrepresented across all leadership positions in private sector companies. I deliberately focused on women due to my interest in gender transformation. Future studies may include African and Coloured men as part of data triangulation. Forbay (2025) notes that the need to include Coloured men as participants in her study seemed to indicate a desire for a "clansman" at the table who could serve as a sponsor.

Future studies could closely examine gender transformation in foreign companies across the automotive original equipment manufacturing and information and communication technology sectors. These could interrogate the mandate given to local country managing directors to advance employment equity, specifically the appointment and tenure of African and Coloured women leaders at top leadership levels in their South African subsidiaries. Furthermore, extending the ICDF for further empirical testing could include the following:

- An examination of multilayered contexts in gender transformation, fostering inclusion to reduce the impact of systemic inequalities for social cohesion.
- Exploration of psychological safety in the aftermath of oppression and privilege, the role of socio-psychological factors, and strategies in enabling inclusive growth are worth exploring.

- An intersectional analysis of private-sector succession-planning processes, with a focus on the next generation of African and Coloured men and women leaders.
- An intersectional analysis of social capital, gender and race considering African and Coloured women leaders, in the private sector.

6.5 CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine the reasons why African and Coloured women leaders stagnated at mid-level leadership and the resultant underrepresentation of these leaders in senior and top leadership positions in South African private-sector organisations. Grounded in narrative inquiry, which was integrated with an intersectional lens within a multilevel context, this study sought to move beyond additive social categories and to draw attention to the lived experiences of women leaders who were absent from strategic discourse in the private sector.

Findings revealed that their paucity at senior and top leadership levels was not due to a skills shortage, as they comprised a large share of the economically active population in South Africa, but rather stemmed from intersecting contextual dynamics. At a micro-level, participants shared experiences of invisibility stemming from their families of origin, phenotypes, language and accents, and identity dilemmas. At a meso-level, organisational practices such as mentorship and access to informal networks, as well as hegemonic masculine cultures, discounted them as suitable talent for executive leadership. African and Coloured women leaders had to constantly prove their worth at each level, a requirement that neither White nor Indian women leaders were subjected to. At a macro-level, persistent apartheid segregation laws were still felt, with African women experiencing intense career immobility and, to some degree, Coloured women. While employment equity legislation had a numerical composition, it did not translate into substantive access to strategic leadership roles for Black African and Coloured women leaders.

The Intersectional Career Development Framework, which highlights the issues arising from the simultaneous influence of social identity markers and systemic factors, is an important contribution. The concepts it captures point to various psychological effects and reactions that hinder African and Coloured women leaders from achieving their career goals. The strategies shared provide future directions for creating truly inclusive workplaces in South Africa. It is important, however, that African and Coloured women leaders avoid getting entangled in the apartheid web of intersectionality by fighting over crumbs. It is also vital to point out that highlighting the relative privileges enjoyed by Indian and White women is not intended to be divisive, as is sometimes suggested. It is meant, instead, to ensure that no “sister” is left behind. As White and Indian women leaders benefit from employment equity, they should uplift their African and Coloured counterparts through advocacy, information

sharing, and networking. Allyship and sisterhood can serve as catalysts for the upward mobility of talented women leaders, thereby contributing to truly inclusive workplaces. As Crenshaw (1989:167) points out, the goal of intersectionality should be to facilitate the inclusion of marginalised groups about whom it can be said: “when they enter, we all enter”. Dialogue and critical self-reflection within and across all groups of women leaders would substantially benefit gender transformation.

6.6 PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

I am grateful for the opportunity to have participated in this doctoral study. I gained invaluable lessons from various aspects of the programme. Before Stats South Africa, Oxfam, and Phaswana (2021) reported that the face of poverty in South Africa was a rural Black African woman, I had not realised there was a name for this phenomenon. The little I knew about feminist theories came from television news, social media, and snippets of South African Women’s Day. The topic did not appeal to me much. I thought I was well-versed in diversity and believed the missing piece in private-sector organisations was meaningful inclusion. Professor Mnguni enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of gender transformation and introduced me to the concept of intersectionality. I wrestled with the concept at first, until I read Crenshaw’s (1989) classic article, “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics.” I ‘got’ her and never looked back. I immersed myself in the history of feminist theory, with particular focus on Black intersectional feminists.

Towards the end of 2015, long before I embarked on the DBL journey, I had interviewed 22 women who had become widowed before reaching fifty years of age. I documented their lived experiences in the aftermath of their loss. The anthology was launched in June 2020 and became an instant success. When I embarked on the doctoral journey, I explored narrative inquiry as a research strategy at my supervisor's suggestion. It dawned on me that I had employed narrative inquiry, albeit imperfectly and without realising it. The doctoral research, therefore, helped me refine my story-collecting skills. I gained incredible insights from the project, including the ethical aspects of research. In hindsight, when I write a sequel to the book, I will apply the lessons learnt during the research process to articulating the findings and telling the women's stories.

I grew up getting lost in reading books, one after the other. I was confident in my ability to write in English. The PhD journey taught me that I was a novice in academic writing. Individual and group supervision sessions helped me understand that doctoral studies differ from my professional role, which I had mastered well enough to attain the executive level. As a student, I came to accept that it was fine not to know and to be open to learning, as pursuing a doctorate was a new and different experience,

after all. Group supervision sessions would take place every ten to twelve weeks on a Saturday. I had completed a formal degree 18 years earlier, and the early months for me were about managing a demanding job and studying all over again. Resetting proved to be a tall order. I would often catch myself dozing off or failing to complete an assignment in time for group supervision. But over time, I found my balance and was thriving. Looking back, those were key milestones for me, and I am grateful for them.

I initially intended to recruit participants from the company where I worked, preferably women with disabilities. After reviewing the ethics module, particularly the informed consent form, which outlines the right to decline or withdraw from participation without explanation, I realised that my positional authority might deter participants from declining my invitation or from withdrawing midstream. I consciously decided not to invite colleagues to participate in this inquiry.

There were occasions during my doctoral journey when I was surprised by participants' reactions, my own responses, or new insights. Comparing interview feedback across datasets showed that the two groups of women were in their own bubbles, shielded from what had happened during apartheid and was happening in the present day in their respective communities of origin. The depth of the apartheid divide-and-rule maxim and its remnants was apparent. Five of the Coloured women leaders, unprompted, declared that they came from broken families and lamented the lack of meaningful support for their communities from either the private sector or the current government's resource allocation. Meanwhile, all African women leaders focused primarily on themselves as employees of last resort in private sector companies, with limited opportunities available to them. I wondered if deprivation in their societies had become normalised and if they were desensitised to it. One participant was an outlier in every sense; she stated upfront that she was colour blind and attributed the career stagnation of both African and Coloured women to poverty consciousness. It seems she had dissociated herself from the struggles of women in general and her racial group, as if to escape the burden of past and present trauma. Although the research question did not explicitly reference Christianity or spirituality, the study's inductive approach led to the emergence of these topics. Most participants attributed their successes to God, and some believed God would intervene in confrontational circumstances or address unfairness at work on their behalf.

The study's chapters followed a logical sequence. There was interesting material, new insights, extraordinary language, and, on my part, eagerness to learn and understand. I was surprised to find that several theories I had learned about were interlinked with my studies. Over time, as I read the material and gained an understanding of the various stances of intersectionality scholars, the language used

became captivating. At times, there were striking similarities and notable differences between the histories of South African women and those of international scholars. I particularly enjoyed conducting interviews, listening to recordings, and gaining insights. I must admit it was painstaking to transcribe the data, yet exciting to conduct both ongoing and final analyses. Of the five themes and twelve subthemes, one theme (“women come on the backfoot”) and four sub-themes (“some blacks are more equal than others”; “personal connections and not expertise alone catapult one’s career”; “black women are held to different and higher standards”; and “employment equity – both a blessing and a curse”) emanated from participants’ verbatim quotes, while three revisions were through free association with my supervisor. Participants unknowingly helped shape the study's themes. We were “in sync”.

Learning from and with a peer group, while receiving supervision and sharing experiences, was crucial for maintaining balance and discussing challenges and successes both within and outside the academic project. I found sisterhood and moral support. Our group supervision meetings kicked off with “How is it with you, your soul?” This enabled us to share questions and experiences in a safe space and address issues that were important yet obstructed academic work progress. During the final year of the doctoral project, I experienced fluctuations in my study habits. I would often replace my study time with other activities, such as reading a journal article, to alleviate guilt. The irony was that I had more time at my disposal than in prior years, and I was on the cusp of completing my thesis. I, perhaps to assuage guilt, would remind myself that it was also important to take rest breaks, such as exercising or engaging in hobbies, and returning to studies refreshed.

The best part of my doctoral journey was attending the Gender Work Organisation (GWO) 2025 conference in Nantes, France, in July 2025. During this trip, I met my supervisor and a DBL peer in person for the first time. All our meetings had been online. The face-to-face encounter deepened our connections. The GWO2025 enabled me to learn from peers, panel discussions, and guest speakers. I realised that our individual supervision and peer group sessions laid the groundwork for communicating our work to the world, and that I had a sense of where I stood in relation to others. The highlight was presenting my own paper, receiving constructive feedback, and connecting with other delegates for future collaborations. If I had to go through the doctoral journey again, I would do so without hesitation.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: ETHICAL LETTER OF APPROVAL

 UNISA university of south africa	
Graduate School of Business Leadership_RERC	
Date: 12/01/2024 Dear: Mrs Nandi Manentsa	Ref #: 2023_SBL_DBL_032_FA_2114 Name: Mrs Nandi Manentsa Student #: 30434483
Decision: Ethics Approval from January 2024 to December 2027	
Researcher: Mrs Nandi Manentsa 878 Coral Tree Drive, Carlsward North Estate, Tamboti Road, Midrand Midrand 30434483@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0833258889	
Supervisor: Prof Peliwe Mnguni ; mngunpp@unisa.ac.za	
Rethinking inclusive workplaces: An intersectional perspective on gender transformation in corporate South Africa.	
Qualification: DBL	
Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the Graduate School of Business Leadership_RERC for the above-mentioned research study Ethics approval is granted for three years.	
The low application was reviewed by Graduate School of Business Leadership_RERC on 20 December 2023 in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.	
The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:	
1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics. 2. 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 Graduate School of Business Leadership_RERC. 3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application. 4. 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.	
5. 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. 6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.	
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7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (December 2027). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal, for Ethics Research Committee approval.	
Additional Conditions	
1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from Unisa. 2. De-identified data must be safely stored on password protected PCs. 3. Care should be taken by the researcher when publishing the results to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the university. 4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be ensured: "Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible." Unisa will not be liable for any failure to comply with this principle.	
Note The reference number 2023_SBL_DBL_032_FA_2114 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.	

Kind regards,

NBW Mitwa

Prof N Mitwa
Chair of Graduate School of Business Leadership_RERC
E-mail: wiltonb@unisa.ac.za

P Msweli

Prof P Msweli
Executive Dean / By delegation from the Executive Dean of Graduate School of Business Leadership_RERC
E-mail: mswelp@unisa.ac.za, wiltonb@unisa.ac.za

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APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research. To remind you, “this study aims to investigate women leaders’ lived experiences in the South African private sector organisations in order to understand the reasons for plateauing in middle management and underrepresentation in senior and executive leadership roles”. In this conversation, I would like to hear about your lived experiences as a private sector leader in South Africa. I am also interested in your thoughts and reflections on the extent to which you believe the employment equity legislation and gender transformation initiatives have been effective in the private sector.

Please note that our conversation is confidential, and your personal information and your organisation's identity will not be shared with anyone. I will use a pseudonym to protect your identity. Participation in this interview is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time if you no longer wish to continue. I am interested in your lived experiences, observations, and reflections. There are, as such, no right or wrong answers. May I please record our conversation so I can focus on it?

SECTION A: OPENING QUESTIONS

Q1: To start our conversation, could you tell me a bit about yourself, as a person, a leader, and a professional?

Q2: Can you share your leadership journey to date, including when and how it started, and what the highlights have been? ... and lows? Where are you now?

Q2(a) What is working well, what is not working so well?

Q2(b) And anything else that comes to your mind.

SECTION B: ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS

Q3. Considering your career journey, to what extent do you believe organisational factors facilitate or hinder meaningful inclusion of women in senior and top positions in South African private sector organisation?

Q3(a) To what extent would you say this is a common experience for all women?

Q3(b) What is your overall assessment of your organisation’s commitment to gender transformation, especially at senior and top levels of leadership?

SECTION C: BROADER SOCIETAL FACTORS

Q4. Reflecting on South African society broadly, including the historical, political, and legislative contexts, what factors do you think enable or hinder women's access to senior and executive leadership levels in South African private sector organisations?

Q4(a) To what extent are the current employment equity legislation and statutory bodies adequate for bringing about inclusive gender transformation in South African private sector organisations?

SECTION D: PERSONAL FACTORS

Now, bringing the conversation back to yourself and your lived experiences as a leader:

Q5: In what ways have personal factors impacted your leadership journey in South African private sector organisations?

Q5(a) How have personal factors contributed to your career growth or held you back?

Q5(b) In what way do you think you have been effective as a leader?

SECTION E: SIMULTANEOUS IMPACT OF SOCIAL IDENTITY CATEGORIES

Q6. To what extent do you believe your demographic characteristics have impacted your lived experiences as a leader in South African private sector organisations?

Q6(a) How has it been for you to work with people of different races, genders, ages, and social capital/networks?

Q6(b) To what extent do you think race, age ... influence effectiveness as a leader?

Q6(c) Do you think men and women experience success/failure differently? In what way?

SECTION F: STRATEGIES

- **Q6: What, in your opinion, would accelerate gender transformation for all women in the private sector in South African private sector organisations?**

Q6(a) What strategies would you suggest for inclusive gender transformation in South African private sector organisations?

Q6(b) What personal strategies would you recommend for women joining or aspiring to join the ranks of leadership in South African private sector organisations?

SECTION G: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

I want to confirm personal demographic information that is important for this study:

Personal details		Career details	
Race		Highest qualification	
Gender		Current position held	
Age		Occupational level	
Disability *		Years in the current role	
Social capital		Organisation sector	

**Dropped as an identity category*

CLOSING COMMENTS

Thank you so much for sharing your story and insights with me. Before we finish our conversation, is there anything else that you would like to share with me?

- What was the interview experience like for you? Any thoughts or reflections on your interview experience?
- Would it be alright with you if I called you after two to three days to either clarify my own understanding or find out if you have new information?

To ensure that your answers are accurately captured, I will transcribe the recordings, encrypt the transcription with a password, and email it to you. Once again, thank you for your time and for sharing your story with me.

APPENDIX III: MANUAL CODING OF THE MAIN RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

PSEUDONYM	CODES										SUB CATEGORIES			CATEGORIES	SUB-THemes	THEME	
TERRY	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes			
THOKOZA	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	AFRICAN WOMEN ARE PRE-JUDGED			
BUHLE	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	BETTER BLACKS	SOME BLACKS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS		
ENKOSI	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	EE ADVANTAGE CURSE			
MMABATHI	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	ITS ABOUT WHO YOU KNOW NOT YOUR EXPERTISE			
MALISA	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	THE IRRATIONALITY OF AGEISM			
PSEUDONYM	CODES										SUB-CATEGORIES			CATEGORIES	POSSIBLE THEMES	SUB-THemes	THEME
VERONA	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	ALREADY PREJUDGED	AT LEAST SHE SPEAKS AFRIKANS		
ROSARIA	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	CULTURAL RACE, GENDER, DIVIDE PALPABLE	PHENOTYPE PREFERENCE		
KAREN	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	COLOURED WORST LOOKED UPON	NOT WHITE ENOUGH, NOT BLACK ENOUGH	FAR FEWER OF US	SOME BLACKS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS
STELLA	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	YOU KNOW WHERE TO FIND ME WHEN YOU NEED EMPLOYMENT	ITS NOT SKILL, BUT CONNECTIONS	CONNECTIONS CATALYST YOUR CAREER	
VICKY	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	FEW COLOURED WOMEN	NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR AN UPGRADE	NOT ENOUGH BLACK	
COLLETTE	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	Handwritten codes	EMBODY WHITE WOMAN LEADER STANDARD	JUDGED ON: ACCENT - CULTURE - SPORT - GARDEN - URBANITY	TRADITIONAL GENDER RULES PERSIST	

APPENDIX IV: RUDIMENTARY THEMATIC NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

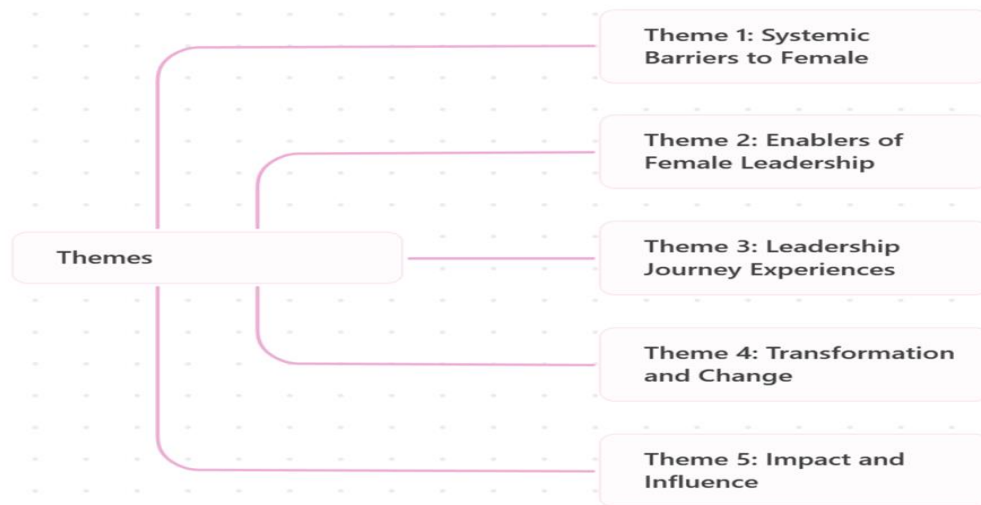
Narrative Block	Narrative Codes	Sub-categories & Categories	Quotes	Potential Narrative Themes	Free Association & Peer & Supervisory debrief
Considering your career journey to date, to what extent do you believe organisational factors facilitate or hinder meaningful inclusion of women in senior and top positions in the South African private sector					
Who else is affected that way? We don't, we normally don't have CEO that is not from headquarter <country>. This time around we have one from headquarter <country> but who was born in South Africa. So when our VP left who was Indian, a male Indian counterpart left and went to <foreign country> for a bigger role. They hired a White female. So now the dynamics are changing that you're seeing a bit of White females coming up and even White males coming up, whereas before it was always just Indian people and you've seeing a lot of Indian females. I mean, there wasn't even White females at some point that were in very high positions, you know, Exco, there is White females. Yes, there's quite a few White females. But in terms of senior management and top management, it's literally White. I mean, Indian females, quite a lot of them. It's amazing, because when we are in meetings and we're in project meetings we are sitting there with so many Indian women and just our CEO and our VP who's White, you know, and it just looks... yes. And also they also just there was a resistance when the VP, a White female was hired, from the Indian group. There was such like the atmosphere at work changed and people were just rebellious. <i>Yeah.</i> In terms of how she got it there was nepotism it was such a toxic environment for some time whereas she had to literally you know speak to us and say I know some of most of you don't like me and they don't like the fact that I was appointed. Come to experience and she was literally, she was taken because she really had good experience whereas they wanted, an Indian person to be taken because they all know each other and they always push it, push each other to get the next position because if a female Indian and coordinates then	Perking order. Meritocracy. Social capital gap. Backlash Entitlement (IWL) Cronyism Inter-female hostility.	Scramble for seniority Indian vs White Females. So many Indian females in our division. Senior and top management all White. Unpleasant atmosphere at work. Indian leaders push for each other. Prove competence.	"resistance by Indian group when a White female VP was hired ". "Got away with a lot of things, our bestie was there..."	Persistent apartheid insensibilities.	Karen - Indian leadership clannish. Dominance of IWL, Trudie, "we have no clansman on the table"... Coloured keep the head down (Collette). Self narratives were taught as kids...

The above figure is an excerpt from a rudimentary thematic narrative analysis, wherein the narrative block is transcribed participant data for the interview opener, followed by codes, sub-categories, and categories, verbatim quotes, a possible theme, and the theme. Free associating would be the exploration of themes and suggestions

APPENDIX V: PARTICIPANT AUDIT TRAIL

Number	Pseudonym	Age	Social capital	Highest qualification	Current position	Years in position	Leadership Level	Sector	Sampling	Duration	Date	Place	Province	Transcription & Analysis	Informed Consent
COLOURED WOMEN LEADERS															
1.	Verona	49	High	Masters in Business Administration	Executive Digital & Innovation	6	Executive	Financial Services	Purposive	2hr, 23min	16/03/2024	Restaurant	GP	Yes	Yes
2.	Rosaria	41	High	Chartered Accountant	Director	5	Executive	Professional Services	Purposive	1hr 36min	20/03/2024	Home	GP	Yes	Yes
3.	Karen	45	Low	Doctor of Bus Leadership	Senior Manager: Global Rewards Design	5	Senior	Tele - Communications	Purposive	2hr 34min	10/02/2024	Virtual	GP	Yes	Yes
4.	Stella	40	Low	PG Dip. Industrial Psychology Labour Relations	HR Manager	2,5	Senior	Agro-based industry	Purposive	1hr 26min	03/04/2024	Hotel	KZN	Yes	Yes
5.	Vicky	44	Yes	ND in Human Resou	Head of People Services	1	Senior	Tele - Communications	Snowball	1hr 00min 00hr	28/06/2024 05/07/2024	Virtual	GP	Yes	Yes
6.	Collette	44	Low	B. Com Human Resources	Shopper Insights Analytics Specialist	1	Middle	Fast Moving Consumer Goods	Purposive	1hr 37min	14/03/2024	Virtual	KZN	Yes	Yes
Pilot	Shelley (Pilot)	37	High	Post Grad Dip in Labour Relations	HR Manager	15	Middle	Manufacturing	Purposive	1hr 31min	07/02/2024	Workplace	KZN	Yes	Yes
AFRICAN WOMEN LEADERS															
1.	Terry	49	High	B. Accounting Science	Managing Director	1	Executive	Information & Communication Technology	Purposive	2hr 15min	24/02/2024	Home	GP	Yes	Yes
2.	Thokoza	40	High	Hon. In Business Management	Senior Director: People	6	Executive	Logistics	Purposive	1hr 09min	16/04/2024	Virtual	GP	Yes	Yes
3.	Buhle	55	High	B.Admin Hon Industrial Relations	Senior Manager HR	8	Senior	Petro Chemicals & Mining	Purposive	1hr 30min 0hr 37min	18/04/2024 29/04/2024	Virtual	GP	Yes	Yes
4.	Enkosi	57	Low	Masters	Senior Manager: Global Leadership & Career Manager	5	Senior	Tele-communications	Snowball	1hr 21min	27/06/2024	Virtual	GP	Yes	Yes
5.	Mmabatho	53	Low	M.Sc. Environmental Mgmt.	Manager Environmental Safety &	12	Middle	Automotive Retail	Purposive	1hr 23min	24/02/2024	Restaurant	GP	Yes	Yes
6.	Malisa	44	Low	B.Com Post Grad.	Supply Chain Ordering & Distribution	7	Middle	Automotive OEM	Purposive	1hr 30min	30/04/2024	Virtual	GP	Yes	Yes
Pilot	Phelokazi (Pilot)	39	None	B. Tech in HR	HR Business Partner	10 months	Middle	Mining sector	Purposive	1hr 15min	07/02/2024	Virtual	KZN	Yes	Yes

APPENDIX VI: ATLAS.TI THEMES



APPENDIX VII: MAIN RESEARCH OBJECTIVE FROM CODES TO MAIN THEME

Main Research Objective: Examine the extent to which race, gender, age and social capital simultaneously impact women leaders' lived experiences in South African corporations.								
Pseudonym	Narrative codes	Sub-Categories	Sub-Categories	Categories	Potential Themes	Possible themes	Narrative Themes	Core Narrative Theme
Verona	14	11	4	4	1	14	7	1
Rosaria	32	26	10	3	2			
Karen	52	18	6	5	3			
Stella	13	10	4	2	2			
Vicky	18	7	5	3	2			
Collette	21	16	4	3	2			
Total	150	88	33	20	12			
Terry	58	20	5	3	3			
Thokoza	15	16	4	2	2			
Buhle	26	12	5	2	2			
Enkosi	20	15	3	3	2	14	7	1
Mmabatho	48	18	4	3	3			
Malisa	27	14	4	3	2			
Total	194	95	25	16	14			
Grand Total	344	183	58	36	26	14	7	1

Nandi Manentsa:
Shared inequalities,
discordant career
narratives

NandiM:
3 subthemes and
4 storylines

APPENDIX VIII: THEME 2: INTRANSIGENT ANDROCENTRIC MODELS SHAPE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

PSEUDONYM	CODES	SUB-CATEGORIES	CATEGORIES	POSSIBLE SUB-THEMES	CORE NARRATIVE THEME
VERONA	Toxic workplace. Disrespected. Excessive pay makes men aggressive.	Resistance comes from a place of fear. Upward mobility strain	Bring my A Game. Its hectic young people will be killed.	Acquiesce to get insider status	Intransigent androcentric models shape organisational culture
ROSARIA	Women leaders complicit. Anxiety inducing practices.	Clocking watching. Psychological safety threat.	Coloured females fewer. Boxing people.	Intra-female rivalry rife	
KAREN	Be like men, play golf. Work home life vicious Cyle. Recreation clash with family values	Political culture. Its who you know, not expertise. Tee ta tee with CEO.	Women execs under pressure. Survival of fittest.	Toxic workplace bullying	
STELLA	Credibility gap. Productivity focus. Male dominated. Oblivious of women's	Compete to be noticed. Prove your worth first. Male dominated.	Women incapacitated.	It's a boys club	
VICKY	Conform to cultural expectations. No networks, no mentoring.	Far fewer Coloured, pull as you rise. Culturally defined roles.	Age old gender stereotypes.	Old school always on 24/7	
COLLETTE	Judged by my accent. I keep the taste of poverty close to my mouth. Don't question.	Alienating culture. White sport, different language.	How did I make it to this line? Does not fit in.	No feel for the game	
PSEUDONYM	CODES	SUB-CATEGORIES	CATEGORIES	POSSIBLE THEMES	CORE NARRATIVE THEME
TERRY	Autocratic & insecure leader. Managed out. Unless assisted. Inevitable fall-out.	Not trusted by our own. Burden of transformation, mentorship is on you. CW & IW names sound better.	Black women judged harshly.	Unrelenting masculinity	Black woman, you're on your own
THOKOZA	Soul destroying culture. Overarching leader voice. Brokenness and purposed.	Environment not normal. Corporate socials after hours. Fixing it is boiling the ocean. New role fulfilling.	Tone deaf leadership. It broke me! The higher one grows, the bigger the sacrifices.	Compromised state of well being.	
BUHLE	Only Black person in the room. No protection. Anxiety inducing Exco.	Black women under scrutiny. WW have it easy despite fumbling.	Our won people against us. Black women on tenterhooks.	Armoury for the Exco boiling room.	
ENKOSI	String along, undermined. Patriarchal mindset.	Its our world, not your world. Afrikaans an advantage.	Exec leadership, members only!	Many are called, few are chosen	
MMABATHO	Antagonist. Denigrated and disrespected. Overqualified. A threat.	Outspoken blacks are silenced. Black HR exec part of the problem.	Silenced when querying things. Aggressive, masculine.	Blocked career pathways	
MALISA	IWL dominant followed by white. Black and Coloured marginalised.	Bestie appointments. Coloured WL keep their heads down, Blacks vocal.	Onwards upwards yet static for the main beneficiaries.		