



**A TALENT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR THE ADVANCEMENT
OF WOMEN TO EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY IN THE
SOUTH AFRICAN MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY**

by

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24 JULY 2026

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A Talent Management Framework for The Advancement of Women to Executive Management: A Case Study in the South African Manufacturing Industry

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DEDICATION

To my incredible parents, who, despite not having formal education, taught me the most valuable lessons in life: resilience, integrity, and the pursuit of excellence. To my father, who carried himself with the wisdom and dignity of a professor, and to my mother, whose strength and quiet support gave me the courage to dream: this work is a reflection of your sacrifices and your unwavering belief in me. This achievement is dedicated to you, with love, honour, and gratitude.

My father Jabulani Sylvester Tshabalala

and

my mother, Julia Tshabalala

ABSTRACT

A Talent Management Framework for The Advancement of Women to Executive Management: A Case Study in the South African Manufacturing Industry

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DEGREE: DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

SUBJECT: MANAGEMENT STUDIES

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Institutional structures in male-dominated industries perpetuate gender hierarchies, creating barriers to women's leadership advancement. In manufacturing, these challenges are intensified by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors that restrict the career growth of women. While progress toward gender equity has emerged in sectors like finance, ICT and academia, the manufacturing industry remains critically underexplored and resistant to transformation. Women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions within the manufacturing sector despite ongoing gender transformation initiatives. This study explored the organisational, social, and individual barriers affecting women's advancement into leadership positions within a manufacturing organisation in South Africa. A qualitative single-case study design was adopted, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 employees serving in managerial and executive position. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and experiences related to gender inequality, organisational culture, career progression, stereotypes, and leadership opportunities.

The findings revealed that structural barriers, masculinised workplace culture, limited inclusivity and representation, unequal access to career development, and Merit-based biased, Accent bias continue to hinder women's leadership advancement. While previous studies have primarily focused on identifying barriers, this study's principal contribution lies in the development of a context-specific Talent Management framework aimed at enhancing women's leadership representation within the manufacturing sector. The proposed framework integrates inclusive recruitment and promotion practices, leadership development initiatives, mentorship and sponsorship programmes, organisational culture transformation, performance support systems,

and retention strategies to address systemic gender disparities. Theoretical contributions of the study provide a multi-level explanation of women's managerial and executive advancement that captures the interaction between individual, organisational, and societal factors. It offers practical recommendations on the implementation of gender-responsive personnel management strategies to support women's career development and leadership development. The study contributes to the fields of talent management, gender studies, and organisational leadership by offering a practical and theoretically grounded framework that organisations can utilise to promote sustainable gender inclusion and leadership equity in male-dominated industries.

Keywords: Manufacturing sector, talent management, African feminist, stereotype, women's leadership advancement, executive management, intersectionality, organisational culture, social role theory, human capital theory

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

The following abbreviations and acronyms are used throughout the study.

4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
ATLAS.ti	Archiving Textual Materials and Analysing Linguistic Structures Tool for Insights
AU	African Union
B-BBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resource Management
KSA	Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities
ODETP	Occupationally Directed Education and Training Practices
SDF	Skills Development Facilitator
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
SA	South Africa
SMMEs	Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises
T&D	Training and Development
TMM	Talent Management Framework
UN	United Nations
VP	Vice President
WIL	Work-Integrated Learning
WSP	Workplace Skills Plan

CHAPTER 1:

RESEARCH ORIENTATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Across the globe, and specifically within many African countries, women disproportionately endure intersecting forms of vulnerability rooted in gender-based violence, armed conflict, terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and systemic exclusion; all rooted in the deeply ingrained socio-economic, cultural, and political structures of male dominance (Moraka, 2024). The African Union's Agenda 2063 (AU, 2015) calls for inclusive, gender responsive development as a bedrock for the long-term aspiration of creating an equal, just, and prosperous Africa. However, despite the African Union's (AU) vision, women are also the lowest participants in the mainstream economies, are marginalised in governance structures, and vastly under-represented in industries such as the manufacturing industry and in executive-level positions (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2019; Haynes, McKibbin & Novicevic, 2020). According to the AU, women constitute a mere 38% of the manufacturing workforce, despite being responsible for up to 80% of food production and processing.

Despite the various institutional efforts, women continue to face significant marginalisation in positions of power and decision-making relative to their male counterparts (UNESCO, 2020). The redress of this persistent inequality requires more than regulatory compliance, and more strategic internal practices that promote meaningful inclusion are necessary (Opara, Wynn & AlMazrouei, 2020; Adapa & Sheridan, 2021; Sliwa, Johansson & Taylor, 2023)

The strategic integration of women into executive pipelines serves as a critical differentiator for organisations, yet entrenched gender biases often impede women progression (Mohapatra & Bhattacharya, 2016). Specifically, organisational definitions of talent are frequently masculinised, creating identities that prioritise certain groups while systematically overlooking the leadership potential of women (Swales, 2020). This exclusion is further exacerbated by the "new boys' network" and reliance on closed recruitment processes, which limit the transparency of leadership identification and perpetuate existing gender gaps (Scholten and Witmer, 2017). To address these systemic imbalances, organisations must reframe leadership development as a form

of identity work that recognises how cultural biases specifically obstruct the professional evolution of women (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011). Furthermore, relying on subjective performance appraisals often reinforces institutional traditions that equate management capability with masculine traits, effectively filtering out diverse talent pools (Loumpourdi, 2023). To counteract these exclusionary practices, manufacturing sector must transition toward objective, gender-neutral talent management systems that mitigate the impact of inherent systemic biases (Festing, Kornau & Schäfer, 2014; Sil & Lenka, 2025). Beyond addressing biased appraisal metrics, implementing structured, gender-focused leadership programs and providing access to diverse mentoring networks are essential to accelerate professional readiness (Chan & Reichard, 2025; Chas & Kolhe, 2026). Formal sponsorship initiatives further enhance these efforts by ensuring that seasoned executives actively advocate for the advancement and visibility of high-potential women in executive roles (Lux *et al.*, 2025).

1.1.1 Preliminary literature review

The South African manufacturing sector provides a particularly important context for examining women's leadership advancement due to its historically masculine organisational culture and deeply entrenched gendered labour structures. Traditionally characterised by rigid hierarchies, technical occupational segregation, and male-dominated operational environments, the manufacturing industry has long been associated with patriarchal workplace norms that privilege masculine leadership identities and restrict women's upward mobility.

Zawedde and Bhorat (2022) identified institutional impediments, such occupational gender segregation, discriminatory hiring practices, and restricted access to technical training and skills development, as significant factors that marginalise women from high-value roles. The enduring challenges signify not only continuous workplace discrimination but also the enduring repercussions of apartheid-era labour policies, which confined women's economic involvement, particularly that of Black women, to the most hazardous and unskilled segments of the labour market.

Anker (2001) characterised this phenomenon as horizontal segregation, wherein men and women are allocated to distinct vocations, and vertical segregation, characterised by male predominance in senior or decision-making positions. Ramdass (2009)

highlighted that, within the South African context, women are over-represented in the clothing and textile industries, whereas men predominate in heavy industrial sectors such as metals, automotive, and electronics.

This segregation not only restricts women's economic empowerment but also perpetuates gender-based preconceptions regarding the suitability for specific roles. Blau and Kahn (2017) contended that the global gender wage disparity in manufacturing endures due to variations in occupational hierarchy, experience, and the devaluation of women's contributions. According to UNIDO (2021), in numerous industrial economies, women in manufacturing receive up to 20% lower wages than their male counterparts in equivalent positions.

In South Africa, Bosch, Van der Linde and Barit (2020) discovered that female leaders in manufacturing experience considerable disparities in compensation and acknowledgement relative to their male counterparts possessing equivalent abilities and responsibilities. Eagly and Carli (2007) characterised these phenomena as a 'labyrinth' of impediments, encompassing institutional discrimination and informal exclusion, that obstruct women's advancement into leadership positions.

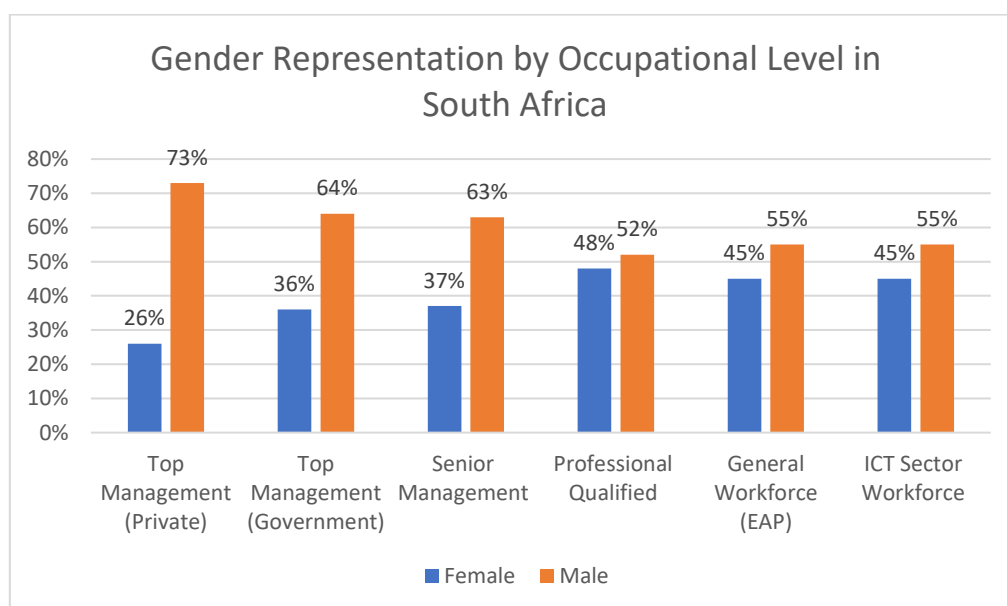


Figure 1.1: Gender representation

Source: 2024–2025 CEE

Figure 1.1 depicts gender representation across occupational tiers in South Africa, based on the 2024–2025 CEE and governmental statistics. At 26%, women are under-represented in senior management roles, especially in the private sector.

Representation gradually improves among both trained professionals and common workers, nearing equality (~45–48%). The sharp decline in female representation from 'Professional' roles (48%) to 'Senior Management' positions (26%), as illustrated in Figure 1.1, empirically substantiates the 'leaky pipeline' and 'glass ceiling' constructs. This pattern reflects a systemic failure in middle-management talent retention strategies within the sector. The ICT sector demonstrates some advancement but remains predominantly masculine, including roughly 45% women and 55% males. According to Jain (2020), women employed in manufacturing environments often encounter isolation, sexual harassment, and insufficient support for professional progress.

Across global industrial sectors reveals persistent patterns of occupational segregation, profoundly shaped by historical, cultural, and structural disparities. Researchers, such as Anker (2001) and the ILO (2020), have observed that women's employment in manufacturing is primarily concentrated in lower-skilled, labour-intensive roles, particularly within feminised sectors like textiles, apparel, and footwear (TCF).

In developing regions like Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, women constitute over 70% of the workforce in garment factories; however, they are largely confined to roles such as stitching and quality control, with limited opportunities for progression into supervisory or decision-making positions (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004; ILO, 2020). This distinction is reinforced by institutional and cultural constraints, such as restricted access to skills training and union representation, which academics argue foster exploitative employment practices and economic marginalisation (Barrientos *et al.*, 2011).

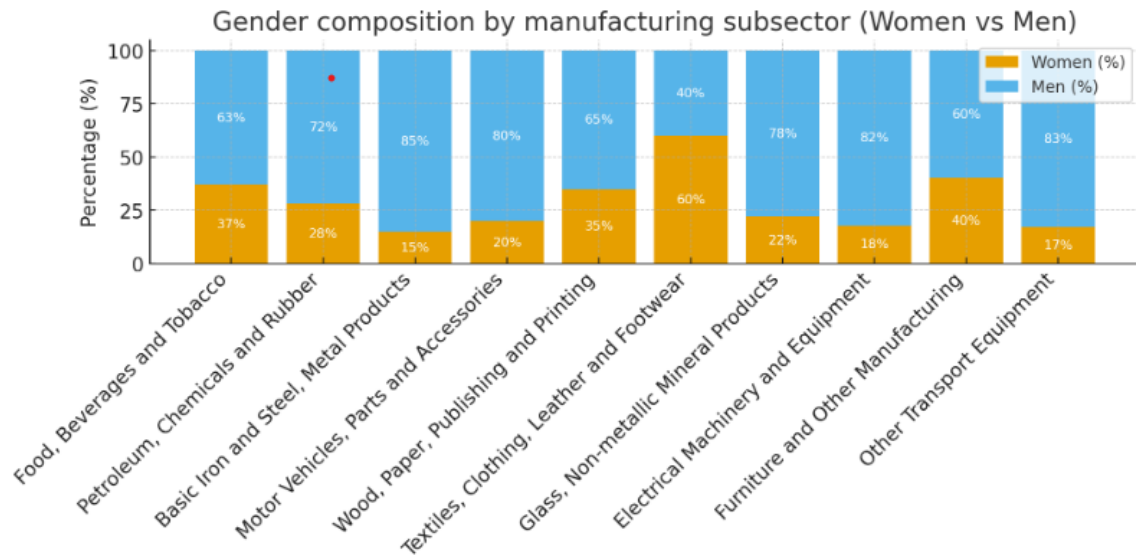


Figure 1.2: Gender composition by manufacturing sub-sector

Source: CEE, 2024

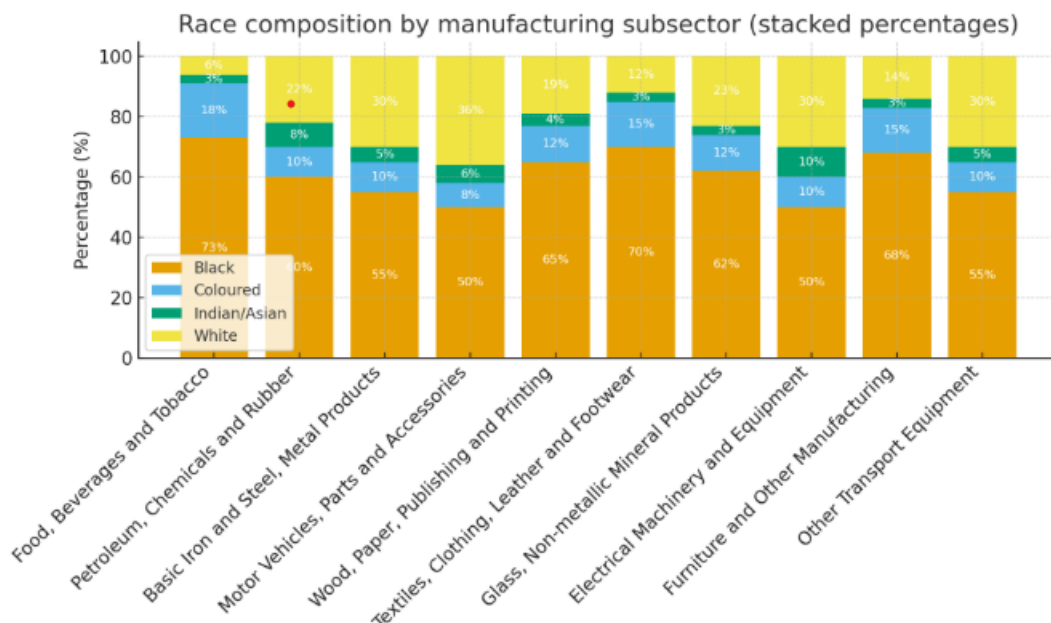


Figure 1.3: Race composition by manufacturing sub-sector

Source: CEE, 2024

The food and beverage manufacturing sector demonstrates similar gender stratification, but with regional variations. For example, in South Africa, women constitute 30–45% of the workforce, primarily engaged in agro-processing tasks which include sorting, packing, and operating semi-automated machinery (UNIDO, 2021). Elson and Pearson (1981) clarified that these positions often embody traditional

gender roles in domestic food preparation, hence, perpetuating the patriarchal concepts of 'appropriate' female employment.

This alignment may facilitate female entry into the sector, while simultaneously constraining women's progression into technical or administrative positions. Researchers, like Razavi (2009), contended that women's predominance in informal or small-scale food production exacerbates their exclusion from formal training systems, financial resources, and supply chain networks, hence, reinforcing their economic vulnerability.

A contrasting dynamic is seen in the electronics and electrical manufacturing sub-sector, which employs a substantial number of women in global supply chains but offers limited chances for promotion. In countries, such as the Philippines and Mexico, women represent as much as 80% of the electronics assembly workforce (UN Women, 2022; Fernandez-Stark *et al.*, 2011). Despite women's substantial representation in industrial occupations, researchers, such as Ngai (2005), have argued that this visibility obscures underlying inequalities, as women are primarily relegated to repetitive, low-paying positions requiring fine motor skills, with limited prospects for progression to technical or leadership roles. The challenges are attributed to institutional factors including limited access to STEM education, gender-based hiring biases, and workplace cultures that undermine female contributions to innovation and decision-making (Charles & Bradley, 2006).

In contrast, some sectors, such as automobile and heavy machinery manufacturing, are primarily male dominated. According to the ILO (2022), women constitute less than 20% of the workforce in these areas across major economies. Cockburn (1985) and Faulkner (2007) attributed this gap to the gendered conceptions of technical competence and physical ability, which consistently marginalise women from technical professions and production management roles. Furthermore, institutional deficiencies in modifying workplace circumstances, including the availability of gender-appropriate safety equipment and sanitary facilities, further marginalise women from significant involvement in this industry. This exclusion is seen in the under-representation of women in engineering education and apprenticeships, corroborating Powell *et al.*'s (2009) claim that manufacturing upholds a 'masculine culture' that resists gender inclusion.

The chemicals and pharmaceuticals sub-sector offer a more equitable landscape, particularly in pharmaceutical manufacturing, where the representation of women in quality control and regulatory roles is significantly higher (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Hunt *et al.* (2013) linked this trend to heightened female participation in life sciences education, a pattern absent in engineering-focused chemical manufacture. Despite the apparent progress in the presence of women in laboratory and compliance roles, gender barriers persist at senior levels. Ridgeway (2011) argued that even in ostensibly meritocratic environments, gender biases subtly influence promotion paths, resulting in the continued under-representation of women in executive and research and development (R&D) leadership positions.

Emerging sectors, including high technology and advanced manufacturing, such as robotics, artificial intelligence, and additive manufacturing, present both innovative difficulties and opportunities. Despite their potential for economic transformation, many sectors display significant gender inequalities. UNESCO (2023) reported that women represent less than 25% of the workforce in most advanced manufacturing sub-sectors, primarily holding administrative roles rather than technical ones. Buse *et al.* (2013) asserted that this under-representation results from shortcomings in the educational pipeline and entrenched gender biases in recruitment, evaluation, and corporate culture.

A growing consensus exists among scholars and policy advocates that is crucial for this gap to be closed to ensure innovation and equity. Targeted STEM scholarships, mentorship networks, and inclusive employment policies are increasingly acknowledged as successful measures for alleviating gender disparities (Hill *et al.*, 2010).

1.2 PROBLEM STUDIED

Despite significant global and regional efforts to advance gender equality, women continue to experience limited access to leadership positions, particularly within male-dominated sectors such as manufacturing. Over the past two decades, South Africa has implemented extensive legislative and policy interventions aimed at promoting workplace transformation and gender equity, including the Employment Equity Act, Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) initiatives, diversity

mandates, and organisational transformation strategies. More recently, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting frameworks and post-COVID workplace transformation agendas have further intensified expectations for inclusive leadership and gender representation within organisations. However, the translation of these policy interventions into meaningful upward mobility for women in the manufacturing sector remains limited.

The persistence of gender disparities in leadership is reflected in the 2023–2024 Commission for Employment Equity report, which indicates that women occupy only 25.8% of top management positions in South Africa (CEE, 2023/24). Within the manufacturing sector specifically, women remain disproportionately concentrated in junior, semi-skilled, and unskilled occupational categories, while representation at executive and senior managerial levels remains significantly low. These patterns suggest that legislative compliance and organisational diversity initiatives have not adequately addressed the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers limiting women's advancement into leadership roles.

Existing literature demonstrates that women in male-dominated industries continue to encounter exclusionary organisational cultures, gender stereotyping, limited access to leadership development opportunities, and restricted participation in influential professional networks (Loumpourdi, 2023). Research conducted within the South African context further highlights how patriarchal organisational systems, masculine leadership norms, and racialised workplace dynamics continue to constrain women's career progression in manufacturing and related sectors. Although transformation policies have increased formal commitments to gender equity, substantial organisational and cultural resistance persist, limiting the effectiveness of these interventions in practice.

Furthermore, much of the existing scholarship has examined women's underrepresentation descriptively, focusing primarily on barriers to advancement without sufficiently addressing the disconnect between macro-level transformation policies and organisational-level implementation realities within manufacturing environments. While studies have explored gender inequality, leadership exclusion, and organisational culture independently, limited research has developed an integrated and contextually grounded Talent Management framework capable of

addressing the intersection of race, gender, organisational culture, and leadership progression within South Africa's manufacturing sector.

The core problem addressed in this study is therefore not merely the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, but the absence of a contextually adapted meso-level Talent Management framework capable of bridging the gap between national transformation policies and entrenched organisational realities within manufacturing sectors. Consequently, despite progressive legislative reforms and corporate diversity mandates, women's leadership advancement in the manufacturing sector remains constrained by deeply embedded structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that existing organisational interventions have failed to adequately resolve.

This study therefore seeks to develop a contextualised Talent Management framework for advancing women into leadership positions within South Africa's manufacturing sector by integrating feminist, social role, and intersectionality perspectives. The study aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to workplace transformation, leadership development, and gender-inclusive organisational practices within male-dominated industries.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The primary goal of the current study was to examine the factors that hinder women's advancement to managerial or executive roles in South Africa's manufacturing sector, and to analyse how these factors vary within the context of cultural, systemic, and organisational influences and develop a talent management framework for the South African manufacturing industry.

1.3.1 Primary aim of the study

The primary aim of this study is to develop a talent management framework that supports the advancement of women into executive management positions within the South African manufacturing industry. To achieve this aim, the study investigates the factors that hinder women's advancement to managerial or executive roles in South Africa's manufacturing industry.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The term ‘research aim’ usually refers to the main goal or overarching purpose of a research study, and research questions aim to clarify the specifics of the issue (Creswell, 2024).

1.4.1 Secondary questions of the study

Based on the problem statement and the study’s importance, the following research questions were formulated for and explored in this study:

- How does culture in the manufacturing industry contribute to or hinder the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions?
- To what extent do stereotypes about women’s abilities and roles affect their progression into managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry?
- How are talent management initiatives in the manufacturing industry supporting the advancement of women managers into executive roles, and how are these initiatives perceived by them?
- How does the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors influence the advancement opportunities for women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry?
- How does the manufacturing sector use talent management to support women in advancing to leadership and executive roles?

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives of a study typically describe the steps taken to answer the research questions (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). The research objectives are categorised into primary (main) and secondary objectives, as discussed below.

1.5.1 Primary objective of the study

The primary research objective of the current study was to examine the cultural, systemic, and organisational factors hindering women from advancing to managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry, with a specific focus on the roles of culture, stereotypes, intersectionality and talent management practices, and to develop a talent management framework for the South African manufacturing industry.

1.5.2 Secondary objectives of the study

Based on the primary objective of the study, the following secondary objectives were formulated for the study:

- To examine the impact of culture in the manufacturing industry on the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions.
- To assess the impact of stereotypes about women's abilities and roles on their progression into managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry.
- To explore talent management initiatives that have been implemented to support the advancement of women in the manufacturing industry, and to examine how women perceive them.
- To explore the influence of intersectionality, encompassing gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors, on the advancement opportunities for women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry.
- To examine how effective talent management practices support the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions

1.6 RESEARCH APPROACH

The theoretical foundation of this study refers to the broad body of theories that inform the understanding of women's advancement into executive management positions within the South African manufacturing industry. These theories provide the conceptual basis for examining the complex factors influencing women's leadership progression. The study draws primarily on African Feminist Theory, Social Role Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Intersectionality Theory, with supporting insights from talent management and leadership literature. Collectively, these theories explain how individual, organisational, and societal factors shape women's career advancement opportunities.

The current research study used a feminist approach to guide the study and research process. Hesse-Biber (2013) explained that feminist research aims to examine and challenge androcentric bias within disciplines, while encouraging researchers to include gender as a key element of analysis. This approach is essential for studies in post-colonial countries, where historical systems of oppression, such as colonisation,

patriarchy, and racism, have combined to marginalise women (Nienaber & Moraka, 2018).

In this context, feminism helps explore the structural and cultural barriers that still prevent women from accessing opportunities in leadership, power, and decision-making (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). It responds to feminist scholarship that critiques the view of women as the 'other of men', meaning women have always been seen only in relation to men, and as inferior versions of them (Kalemba, 2020). This mindset has heavily influenced societal norms, institutional cultures, and workplace environments, especially in male-dominated sectors like manufacturing, and continues to shape gendered perceptions of leadership, competence, and authority, often discriminating against women seeking executive and managerial roles (Nkomo, 2021). Therefore, a feminist research approach is essential to centre women's experiences, voices, and stories, and to promote greater participation in leadership roles (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

Against this backdrop, a qualitative research approach was considered a suitable method for exploring and analysing the experiences and challenges faced by women striving for managerial or executive roles within the manufacturing industry, employing the Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) meso-level framework as an investigative instrument.

Subsequently, the interpretive paradigm was deemed appropriate for this research, as it assumes that the researcher will be able to study phenomena in their natural settings, to gain an understanding of what these phenomena mean to the participants who are women in the manufacturing industry (Wang, 2015). The participants in this study were based at a selected manufacturing facility, and as such, they provided insights that contributed to developing a meso-level talent management framework for the manufacturing industry.

1.7 DELINEATIONS OF THE STUDY

Delineation refers to the precise definition of the researcher's responsibilities and what is included or excluded from the research or thesis statement. It explicitly states the boundaries of the study (Hofstee, 2006). This study was specifically confined to the South African manufacturing industry and focused on the advancement of women into managerial and executive management positions. The research examined talent management practices that influence women's progression to senior leadership roles,

including recruitment, talent identification, leadership development, succession planning, mentoring, sponsorship, and retention strategies.

Furthermore, the study focused on the development of a context-specific talent management framework aimed at increasing the representation of women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing sector. While the framework incorporates recommendations related to recruitment, development, and retention practices, the study did not seek to develop a new universal theory of talent management. Rather, it sought to generate practical and theoretical insights that could inform gender-responsive talent management strategies within the South African manufacturing context.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study were developed to ensure that the participants had relevant knowledge and experience of the advancement of women into executive management positions in the South African manufacturing industry. The study involved both male and female employees at different levels of the selected manufacturing organisation as full time and part time workers. Participants were required to be in employment within the manufacturing industry and be based in South Africa. The study also included people in managerial and executive positions, as these positions are directly relevant to understanding leadership advancement and talent management practices. Employees with varying levels of organisational tenure were considered eligible if they had adequate experience in the organisation. The participants were selected from the age range of 30-65 years as this age group was believed to be the most probable to have people with substantial professional and leadership experience.

The study excluded persons working outside of manufacturing industry and outside of South Africa. Employees who were not in managerial or executive roles (such as interns, temporary staff and entry level employees) were also excluded due to limited exposure to leadership advancement processes. In addition, the sample excluded individuals with an extremely short organisational tenure, such as being within their probationary periods, because they may not have gained sufficient insight into organisational talent management practices. We also excluded participants aged 18-21 years, who were less likely to have had the experience to meaningfully contribute to discussions about career advancement in management and executive roles.

1.8 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

This section defines some of the key concepts relevant to the current study.

Talent Management

Talent management refers to the systematic process of attracting, identifying, developing, engaging, retaining, and deploying employees who possess the skills, knowledge, and potential required to achieve organisational objectives (Collings & Mellahi, 2009).

Women's Advancement

Women's advancement refers to the progression of women through organisational hierarchies into positions of increased responsibility, authority, and influence (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Executive Management

Executive management refers to the highest level of organisational leadership responsible for strategic decision-making, organisational performance, governance, and long-term sustainability (Yukl, 2013).

Manufacturing Industry

The manufacturing industry refers to the sector of the economy involved in the transformation of raw materials, components, and intermediate goods into finished products through physical, chemical, or mechanical processes (United Nations Industrial Development Organization [UNIDO], 2023).

Leadership Development

Leadership development refers to the process through which individuals acquire the competencies, knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to perform effectively in leadership positions (Day, 2001).

Succession Planning

Succession planning is a strategic process aimed at identifying, developing, and preparing employees to assume key leadership positions when vacancies arise (Rothwell, 2016).

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes refer to socially constructed beliefs and expectations regarding the characteristics, behaviours, and roles considered appropriate for men and women (Eagly, 1987).

Patriarchy

Patriarchy refers to a social system in which power, authority, and resources are predominantly controlled by men, resulting in gendered inequalities in social, economic, and organisational settings (Walby, 1990).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social identities such as gender, race, class, age, and ethnicity, which interact to create unique experiences of privilege or disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989).

African Feminism

African Feminism is a theoretical perspective that seeks to understand and challenge gender inequalities within African socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts while recognising the unique experiences of African women (Nnaemeka, 2004).

Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling refers to invisible organisational barriers that prevent qualified women and other underrepresented groups from progressing into senior leadership and executive positions despite possessing the necessary skills and qualifications (Cotter *et al.*, 2001).

1.9 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

The remainder of the thesis is arranged in the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background to the Study

This chapter introduces the study and provides the background to the research problem. It outlines the research aim, objectives, research questions, significance of the study, and the scope of the research. The chapter also provides an overview of the challenges affecting the advancement of women into executive management positions within the South African manufacturing industry.

Chapter 2: South Africa's Manufacturing Industry and Women's

This chapter provides a contextual overview of South Africa's manufacturing sector, tracing its historical development from the apartheid era to the present. It examines the political, economic, legislative, and labour market factors that have shaped the industry, with particular attention to race and gender dynamics. The chapter further explores the representation of women in management and executive leadership positions and reviews the policy and legislative frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality and transformation within the sector.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

presents a comprehensive review of the literature related to the advancement of women into executive management positions within the manufacturing industry. The chapter examines the individual, organisational, and societal barriers that impede women's career progression. To provide a holistic understanding of these interconnected factors, a multi-level theoretical framework is developed, integrating key theories that explain the complexities of women's leadership advancement. The chapter further reviews talent management practices that support leadership development, succession planning, and the progression of women into senior leadership roles. An integrated theoretical framework is subsequently developed through the synthesis of African Feminist Theory, Social Role Theory, Human Capital Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and other supporting theories relevant to the study. This framework serves as the lens through which the study explores the factors influencing the advancement of women to executive management positions in the South African manufacturing industry.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted for the study. The chapter discusses the African feminist perspective underpinning the research, the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, and the qualitative case study design employed to explore the factors influencing the advancement of women to executive management positions within the South African manufacturing industry. The chapter further describes the study population, which consisted of managerial and executive employees within the selected manufacturing organisation. A non-probability sampling strategy was utilised to select participants who possessed relevant knowledge and experience related to leadership advancement and talent management practices. The participant selection process is explained in detail, together with the data collection method, which involved semi-structured interviews. The chapter also outlines the thematic data analysis procedures conducted using ATLAS.ti software and discusses the measures implemented to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and ethical compliance throughout the research process.

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussions

This chapter presents and analyses the findings generated from the empirical investigation. The findings are organised according to the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data and are supported by participants' verbatim quotations. The discussion is guided by the research objectives and interpreted through the integrated theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3. The chapter explores the barriers and enablers influencing women's advancement into executive management positions within the manufacturing industry.

Chapter 6: Proposed Talent Management Framework

This chapter presents the talent management framework developed from the findings of the study. The framework integrates individual, organisational, and societal factors that influence women's advancement to executive management positions in the manufacturing sector. The chapter further discusses the practical and theoretical implications of the framework, presents the conclusions drawn from the study, outlines the study's limitations, and provides recommendations for organisations, policymakers, and future research.

Chapter 7: Conclusions, Contributions, and Recommendations

This chapter concludes the study by synthesising the key findings in relation to the primary objective, secondary objectives, and research questions. The chapter reflects on the extent to which the study achieved its aim of developing a talent management framework for the advancement of women to executive management positions in the South African manufacturing industry. It further discusses the study's contributions to theory, methodology, practice, and society. The chapter highlights the study's theoretical contribution by advancing feminist and organisational theories through the integration of African Feminist Theory. Finally, the chapter acknowledges the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for future research, identifying areas where further investigation can expand understanding of talent management and women's advancement within the manufacturing industry and other male-dominated sectors.

1.10 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to present the rationale and motivation for the current study, along with a roadmap for the entire thesis. Managerial executives are responsible for setting strategic direction and act as vital catalysts for organisational performance. Women can make significant contributions due to their talents and diverse perspectives; however, they remain under-represented in executive roles within the manufacturing industry. There is a lack of research on the experiences of women and men in South Africa's manufacturing sector in terms of talent management techniques. However, it is evident that women are a minority in executive positions while men mostly hold these roles. Furthermore, the literature does not report any strategies about best practices for recruiting, developing, and retaining female executives.

This gap in the literature provided an opportunity for the researcher to use the meso-level approach to examine these elements within the unique South African industrial context. This research aimed to contribute to the study of talent management (recruitment, development, and retention) within a specifically chosen segment of the South African manufacturing industry, focusing on the experiences of both men and women in these practices.

The researcher applied a critical research methodology within the framework of African feminism, situated in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, to analyse the talent management practices. The goal was to offer a critical critique, while also developing a new theory of techniques applicable to recruitment, development, and retention, with the aim of increasing women's participation in the manufacturing sector.

CHAPTER 2:

THE SOUTH AFRICAN MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter offered an extensive literature study that built a theoretical framework for comprehending leadership within the manufacturing sector. It meticulously analysed feminist thought and delineated the evolution of feminist movements. The review examined talent management (TM) within a meso-level framework, highlighting the impact of organisational structures and processes on women's representation in leadership roles.

This chapter focuses on the South African manufacturing industry and its importance to the national economy. It examines the historical development of manufacturing in the post-apartheid era, racial dynamics, and labour market outcomes in South Africa, as well as government-facilitated racially selective industrialisation.

2.2 THE GENDERED HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY REALITIES OF SOUTH AFRICAN MANUFACTURING

Discrimination based on race and gender was profoundly ingrained in the apartheid employment system, relegating Black women to predominantly unofficial and minor economic occupations. The democratic reforms implemented post-1994, including the Employment Equity Act (1998) and the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (2003) (B-BBEE), have been enforced inconsistently. However, according to Booysen (2021), while these statutes sought to rectify previous injustices, entrenched workplace cultures and opposition to structural change, has resulted in sluggish advancements. Many initiatives typically adopt a gender-neutral strategy rather than a gender-responsive one, neglecting the distinct obstacles encountered by women. Consequently, gender mainstreaming in industrial policy remains cursory.

Women in manufacturing are marginalised by the effects of industrialisation, imperialism, racial capitalism, and patriarchal social structures. The apartheid regime in South Africa impeded Black men from obtaining favourable positions in industry and

pushed Black women, particularly, into the informal or reproductive economy (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005).

The Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) financed state-owned firms such as ISCOR and SASOL for their operations. The industrial sector was structured to advantage the white minority, systematically excluding Black and female workers from inclusion (Fine & Rustomjee, 1996). Similarly, in global industrial economies, women were either prohibited from factory employment or forced into low-skilled, low-wage positions in sectors like food or garment manufacture, frequently under hazardous conditions (Anker, 2001; ILO, 2020).

During South Africa's transition to democracy, legislation such as the Employment Equity Act (1998), the Skills Development Act (1998), and B-BBEE was implemented. Nevertheless, insufficient measures have been implemented to bridge the gender disparities in manufacturing (Booyesen, 2021; DTIC, 2023). While gender is a crucial component of B-BBEE, its application has not been uniformly implemented across many industries, and there are limited tools to track progress and enforce accountability (Naidoo & Kongolo, 2004). Similarly, industry initiatives, such as the Industry Policy Action Plans (IPAPs) and endeavours by Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), have emphasised productivity and economic competitiveness at the expense of gender transition. This has impeded worker diversity (Ramdass, 2009; Swanepoel & De Beer, 2019b).

Global policies and automation strategies for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) have been criticised for being gender-neutral or regressive, potentially leading to the displacement of women from low-skilled positions without offering clear avenues to higher-skilled technological roles (World Bank, 2020; UNIDO, 2021).

2.3 PAST STUDIES ON SOUTH AFRICAN MANUFACTURING AND WOMEN

Bell (2006) contended that, despite a substantial body of research on South Africa's manufacturing sector, the literature has primarily concentrated on macroeconomic factors like trade liberalisation. For example, Edwards and Lawrence (2008) examined industry competitiveness, technological progress, and labour market reconfiguration. Kaplan (2012) clarified that while these analyses have been crucial in defining

industrial policy outcomes and economic development, they have mostly overlooked gendered perspectives. Bezuidenhout and Bischoff (2021) contended that prevailing research assumes a gender-neutral workforce, neglecting the unique experiences and contributions of women in the domain. Visagie (2018) asserted that the role of women, especially in technical, operational, and leadership roles, has been insufficiently explored.

Casale and Posel (2021) noted that this neglect continues despite national policy commitments to gender equity and affirmative action via mechanisms such as the Employment Equity Act (RSA, 1998) and the B-BBEE framework. Dieltiens and Baatjes (2019) emphasised that empirical evidence indicates women in manufacturing are disproportionately situated in low-skilled, low-wage, and precarious positions, frequently relegated to the least mechanised and informal sectors of production. Theron (2020) substantiated Mosoetsa (2011) by clarifying that institutional barriers, such as occupational segregation, gender discrimination in recruitment and promotion, and unequal access to technical training, persistently obstruct women's progress in industrial career trajectories.

Booyesen and Nkomo (2020) argued that the minimal emphasis on gender in industrial policy discourse neglects intersectional difficulties, especially those encountered by Black women in post-apartheid South Africa. Sebola (2022) clarified that the obstacles stem from patriarchal norms and historical and racial disparities that influence access to education, networks, and capital. Feminist economists contended that neglecting these dynamics compromises social justice and economic efficiency, as gender-inclusive workplaces correlate with enhanced innovation and productivity (Seguino, 2020).

Considering the growing global focus on inclusive industrial development, as articulated in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), it is essential for studies on South Africa's manufacturing to embrace a more intersectional and gender-sensitive methodology. Chatterjee and Deacon (2022) expanded upon the concept introduced by Blackden and Wodon (2021), contending that this methodology enhances the analytical rigour of industrial transformation research and corresponds with national and global objectives for equitable economic growth. Blackden and Wodon (2021) further maintained that forthcoming research should highlight gender

as a primary analytical category rather than a secondary one, ensuring that industrial policy fosters not just economic growth but also inclusive and sustainable development.

2.4 SOUTH AFRICAN MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

The manufacturing industry in South Africa is essential to the country's economic framework, promoting growth and prosperity throughout several sub-sectors (Mohamed, Ngoma & Baloyi, 2023). The sector makes a significant contribution to GDP, employment, and exports; nonetheless, it remains below the average of other emerging nations (Creamer *et al.*, 2012).

The South African government has consistently recognised this potential, implementing various macroeconomic, sectoral, and industrial policies aimed at fostering growth and employment in manufacturing (Lefophane, 2024). Nevertheless, despite these collaborative initiatives, the manufacturing sector continues to encounter significant challenges that impede its ability to stimulate economic growth and job creation, as initially anticipated (Lefophane, 2024). The challenges include high input prices, rigid labour markets, mismatches between educational attainment and the required skills, and substantial import competition (Lefophane, 2024).

The persistent limitations of insufficient infrastructure, particularly in energy and logistics, intensify these challenges by increasing operational expenses and diminishing the competitiveness of local enterprises. The nation has seen premature de-industrialisation, sustaining considerable reliance on resource-based businesses, while investment in productive capacity has stagnated (Mohamed *et al.*, 2023). This stagnation is evidenced by inconsistent economic performance and the slow execution of structural reforms, sometimes exacerbated by poor governance and corruption (Mohamed *et al.*, 2023).

A significant growth problem is presented by the nation's reliance on primary sectors, such as mining, which exacerbates the lack of a dynamic and job-creating manufacturing sector (Bhorat *et al.*, 2020). This structural barrier has led to an extended period of stagnant economic growth and persistent unemployment, obstructing efforts to achieve inclusive development (Bhorat *et al.*, 2020). This situation necessitates a thorough evaluation of the sector's performance over

extended periods, considering critical elements such as employment, mark-ups, exports, domestic sales, and investment (Driver, 2023). This comprehensive assessment is crucial for understanding the historical development of South Africa's manufacturing sector and identifying the specific governmental policies that have either facilitated or hindered its success over time (Hartmann *et al.*, 2021; Wuttke, 2023).

It is crucial to gain an understanding of the connection between competition policy and industrial development, especially given the historical entrenchment of market power in the South African economy (Andreoni *et al.*, 2021). The South African economy has seen sluggish growth, stagnant private investment, and a diminishing tradable sector, leading to increased unemployment, poverty and inequality (Thakoor, 2020). This situation highlights the urgent need for a robust and diverse manufacturing industry to promote sustainable economic growth and alleviate socio-economic disparities (Semenya & Kanayo, 2024; Netshivhambe, 2025).

In addressing these challenges, South Africa has emphasised competition law in its economic reforms, alongside trade liberalisation and industrial policy, to foster diversification and structural transformation in its concentrated markets (Andreoni *et al.*, 2021). Despite these efforts, the economy has encountered obstacles in diversification, and markets remain highly concentrated, hindering the improvement of production capacities (Andreoni *et al.*, 2021).

The persistent concentration in essential industries obstructs the innovation and enhanced productivity necessary for South Africa to achieve a competitive advantage in global markets (Andreoni *et al.*, 2021; Niyimbanira *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the nation's post-apartheid economic transformation has not consistently resulted in widespread prosperity, as seen by the persistent low economic growth and high unemployment rates (Bell *et al.*, 2017, Mohamed *et al.*, 2023). These structural impediments underscore the necessity for continuous and targeted reforms to foster a more egalitarian and resilient economy (Mohamed *et al.*, 2023).

2.4.1 Role of manufacturing in the South African economy

The manufacturing industry has traditionally played a vital role in South Africa's economic development, markedly impacting industrialisation, employment, and export performance (Quantec, 2023). In 2024, the industry constituted roughly 15% of the

nation's GDP, as seen in Figure 2.1, and provided employment for around 1.7 million individuals, underscoring its significant contribution to the economy (CEE, 2024).

The manufacturing sector in South Africa is distinctly varied, encompassing essential sub-sectors such food and drinks, chemicals, automotive, metals, textiles, and machinery, as graphically illustrated in Figure 2.1 below.

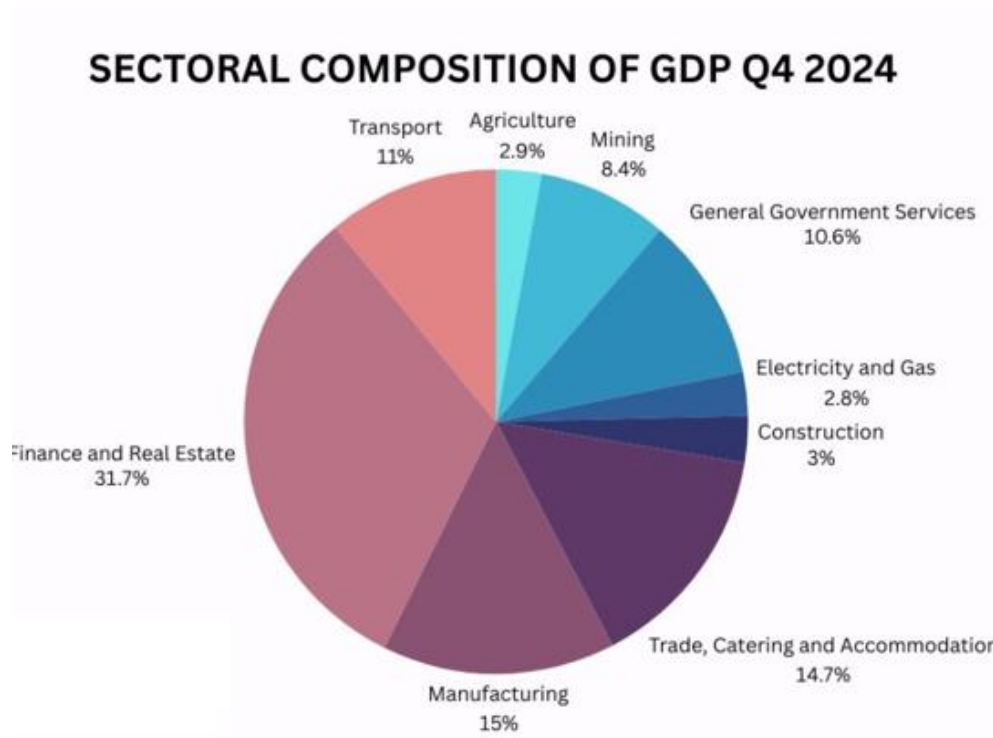


Figure 2.1: Sectoral composition of GDP

Source: CEE, 2024

The DTIC (2021) explained that the automotive sector represents a notable success in industrial strategy, mostly owing to supportive initiatives such as the Automotive Production and Development Programme (APDP), designed to enhance local production and export proficiency. The agro-processing sector is seen as strategic due to its connections to agriculture and its capacity to foster rural development.

Rodrik (2016) explained that the manufacturing sector possesses a substantial multiplier impact, enhancing activity in both upstream industries, such as mining and energy, and downstream industries, including logistics, retail, and services. In addition to its economic ties, manufacturing significantly fosters technical innovation, skills enhancement, and creativity, serving as a catalyst for research and development.

However, Bhorat, Rooney, Steenkamp and Thornton (2021) observed that the industry has undergone a progressive reduction in its relative GDP contribution, attributed to deindustrialisation pressures, heightened global rivalry, and escalating production costs.

In reaction to these structural challenges, the South African government has instituted multiple policy frameworks designed to rejuvenate the sector. These encompass the Re-imagined Industrial Strategy, the South African Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan, and targeted Masterplans for industries like as steel and textile. These programmes aim to improve localisation, assist small and medium-sized firms (SMEs), and elevate the international competitiveness of local manufacturers (DTIC, 2020).

2.5 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE MANUFACTURING SECTOR POST-APARTHEID

The post-apartheid era signified a substantial transformation in South Africa's economic priorities, highlighting the rectification of historical disparities and promoting inclusive growth. The rejuvenation of the manufacturing sector was essential to this transformation, regarded as a crucial catalyst for industrialisation, employment generation, and economic advancement (Hall & Jones, 1999; Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson, 2001; Dell, 2010; Nunn, 2014; Bestari, Kurniawan & Yudhistira, 2022). Initial policy frameworks, such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, sought to stabilise the macroeconomy while fostering inclusive industrial growth (Department of Finance, 1996).

The liberalisation of trade in the late 1990s and early 2000s generated both benefits and challenges. Specific sub-sectors, particularly automotive and chemicals, acquired competitive advantages and enhanced their global integration. Conversely, labour-intensive sectors, such as textiles and footwear, had substantial downturns due to increased import competition, resulting in extensive plant closures and job losses (Edwards & Jenkins, 2015). The irregular adjustment process resulted in premature deindustrialisation, constraining the sector's ability to create widespread employment (Turok, 2012; Todes & Turok, 2018).

In reaction to these structural issues, the South African government instituted several industrial policy measures designed to combat deindustrialisation and enhance economic resilience. Principal measures encompassed the Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP) and sector-specific master plans, which aimed at augmenting local content, enhancing productive capacity, and promoting export-oriented growth (DTIC, 2020). Notwithstanding these initiatives, the manufacturing sector's share of GDP has consistently diminished from over 20% in the early 1990s to roughly 13% in 2023, underscoring the persistent competitiveness challenges and an inability to adequately fulfil industrial policy goals (Quantec, 2023).

Structural impediments, including erratic energy sources, infrastructural inadequacies, skills deficits, and minimal private investment, have persistently obstructed manufacturing-led development. The sector is predominantly defined by capital-intensive operations, exhibiting modest ownership changes and negligible involvement from historically marginalised groups, thus, diminishing the overall effectiveness of industrial policy.

A production-focused public and private sector is crucial for attaining a progressive state. This methodology relies on cooperation among the government, labour, the private sector, and civil society. The developmental state exhibits embedded autonomy, signifying that the bureaucracy functions independently of societal pressures, thereby enabling it to drive social change. Simultaneously, its social embeddedness, particularly the connections established with commerce and industry, facilitates the incorporation of these influential entities into the state's economic strategies. Kohli (1994:1287)

The relationship between the state and the market should be paramount, marked by the active participation of state bureaucracy in economic advancement and industrial change (Lim & Jang, 2006). An indispensable element for the efficacy of developmentalism is 'embedded autonomy', as articulated by Evans (1995). The degree of embeddedness functions as an indicator of the efficacy of developmental states. Established connections between elite bureaucracy and private enterprise are essential for consultation and collaboration, demonstrating a profound autonomy (Evans 1995).

2.6 SOUTH AFRICA'S MANUFACTURING LANDSCAPE

According to Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2023), the manufacturing sector contributes roughly 12–14% to the GDP, a notable decrease from over 20% in the 1980s. Notwithstanding the downturn, the sector continues to be an essential component of the national economy, underpinning employment, exports, and technological advancement. The primary sub-sectors encompass automotive, food and drinks, chemicals, and metal manufacturing.

The government has initiated projects such as the Re-Imagined Industrial Strategy and Master Plans for essential industries to rejuvenate manufacturing. These policies aim to enhance localisation, increase productivity, and foster inclusive industrial development (DTIC, 2022). Nonetheless, persistent hurdles, including energy instability, global rivalry, skills deficiencies, and infrastructure problems continue to impede the business.

Notwithstanding South Africa's extensive legislation, practical execution frequently uncovers deficiencies, particularly in areas conventionally associated with distinct genders. In male-dominated industries such as mining (Niehaus, 2002; Dlamini, 2016; Maake *et al.*, 2023), building (English & Le Jeune, 2012), and engineering (Bowen *et al.*, 2021), regulations and practices may differ markedly for women and gender non-conforming individuals. Despite numerous organisations espousing inclusive human resources policies in principle, the reality on the shop floor frequently belies this assertion (Luiz & Terziev, 2022). Transgender individuals often encounter obstacles when attempting to utilise gender-specific restrooms, notwithstanding formal rules designed to safeguard this right (Patel, 2017).

In fields such as typically perceived as female-dominated, homosexual men frequently encounter microaggressions and gender bias that, while occasionally nuanced and not always overt, diminish their perceived appropriateness for these positions (Kalemba, 2020; Moosa & Bhana, 2022). Despite the anti-discrimination policies established by South Africa's Department of Basic Education, educators possessing varied sexual orientations and gender identities frequently encounter discrimination and harassment in conservative communities (Richardson & Archer, 2008; Brown & Diale, 2017; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022).

2.7 RACE AND LABOUR MARKET OUTCOMES IN SOUTH AFRICA

The South African labour market exhibits significant inequities, a direct result of the former apartheid regime that officially institutionalised discrimination based on racial classification (Mosomi & Wittenberg, 2020). This structure governed access to school, job prospects, and compensation, resulting in a fragmented economic landscape that persists in current labour market outcomes (Mosomi & Wittenberg, 2020). Notwithstanding the abolition of apartheid, racial inequalities endure, as illustrated by markedly elevated unemployment rates among Black/African populations relative to other racial groupings (Dunga & Maloma, 2024). Figure 2.2 indicates that 54.3% of working-age women in South Africa are engaged in the labour field, either as employed individuals or job seekers.

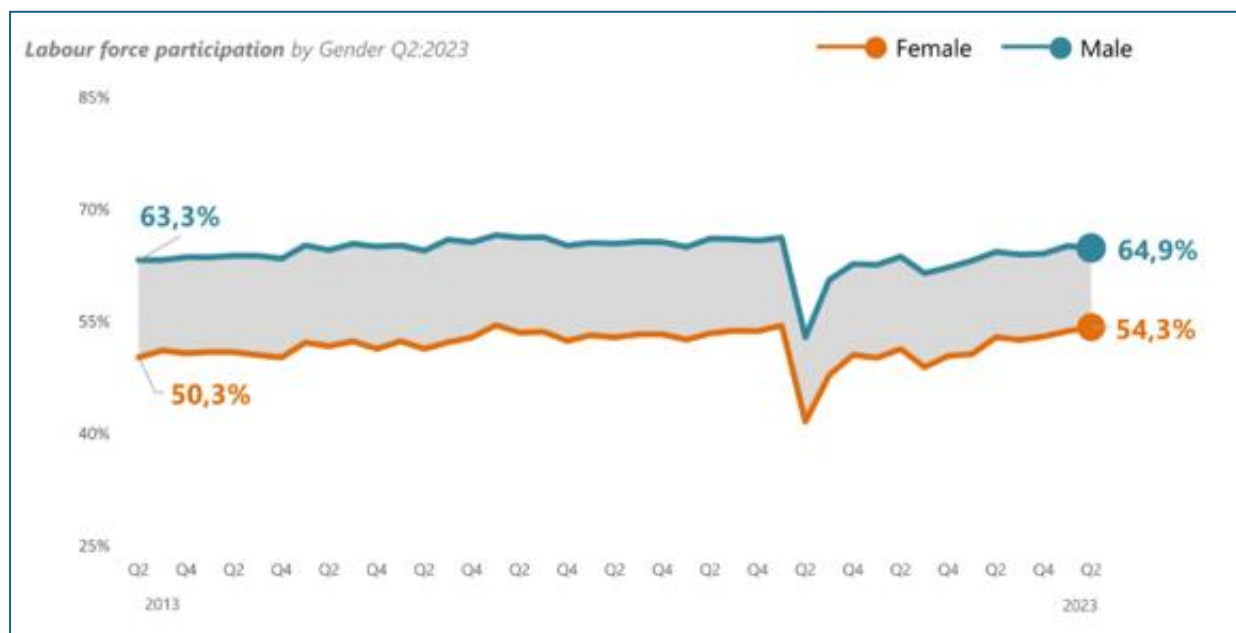


Figure 2.2: Labour force participation by gender

Source: CEE, Q2, 2023

This persistent stratification is further intensified by occupational segregation, wherein historically marginalised persons continue to be concentrated in low-skilled and low-paying positions, despite an overall rise in their employment figures (Valodia & Ewinyu, 2023). This process leads to stagnant median salaries and an expanding earnings distribution, especially at the highest levels, deepening socio-economic disparities (Mosomi & Wittenberg, 2020). This enduring inequity highlights the difficulties in attaining substantial occupational desegregation, with empirical studies indicating

minimal advancement in diminishing racial stratification since apartheid (Gradín, 2018). The historical backdrop of racial discrimination, especially the spatial segregation of Black populations and their restriction to low-skill industries, continues to significantly impact current labour market dynamics (Lin & Liao, 2025).

2.7.1 Marginalisation of women in manufacturing and sector dynamics in South Africa and globally

The manufacturing sector has long been a crucial part of economic growth, industrialisation, and technological progress. Although it is vital, the industry remains highly gendered, and women are often excluded from involvement, representation, and recognition. Women still lack sufficient opportunities in manufacturing worldwide, particularly in skilled and decision-making roles. For example, Statistics South Africa (2024) showed that women made up about 39.3% of the entire manufacturing workforce, mostly holding lower-paying, less secure jobs such as sewing machinists, packers, and food-processing workers in 2024.

Zawedde and Bhorat (2022) argued that there are structural barriers, such as occupational gender segregation, biased hiring practices, and limited access to technical training, that sustain women's marginalisation from high-value positions. Few women work in management, supervision, or technical roles. According to UNESCO (2020), societal biases against women reduce their likelihood of pursuing technical courses. Additionally, industrial training programmes often lack gender-sensitive support systems. Booysen (2021) noted that the historical disparities worsened during apartheid, as employment practices assigned African women to the most precarious and unskilled jobs.

Despite the implementation of progressive labour laws after 1994, such as the Employment Equity Act and the B-BBEE Act, shortcomings in enforcement and deep-seated prejudices have hindered gender equality in the workplace. The informalisation of manufacturing jobs, especially in the garment and textile sectors, disproportionately affects women. Many are engaged in subcontracting or home-based work without social protections, limiting their economic prospects.

2.8 CHANGES OVER TIME IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT, BOARD MEMBERSHIP, AND OWNERSHIP

This section discusses the changes that have occurred over time in senior management, board membership and ownership, with a focus on gender dynamics and diversity trends.

In recent decades, a notable shift in gender equity within senior management, board membership, and corporate ownership has occurred across several sectors globally. This movement is driven by heightened awareness of gender inequality, legislative changes, market demand for diversity, and evolving societal norms. Presently, as seen in Figure 2.3, women hold approximately 34% of senior management roles worldwide, indicating a modest increase from previous years (Thornton, 2025). While this indicates progress, the rate of change remains slow, particularly at the executive level. Similar trends are observed in board involvement, as many countries have implemented gender quotas or informal targets to improve female representation.

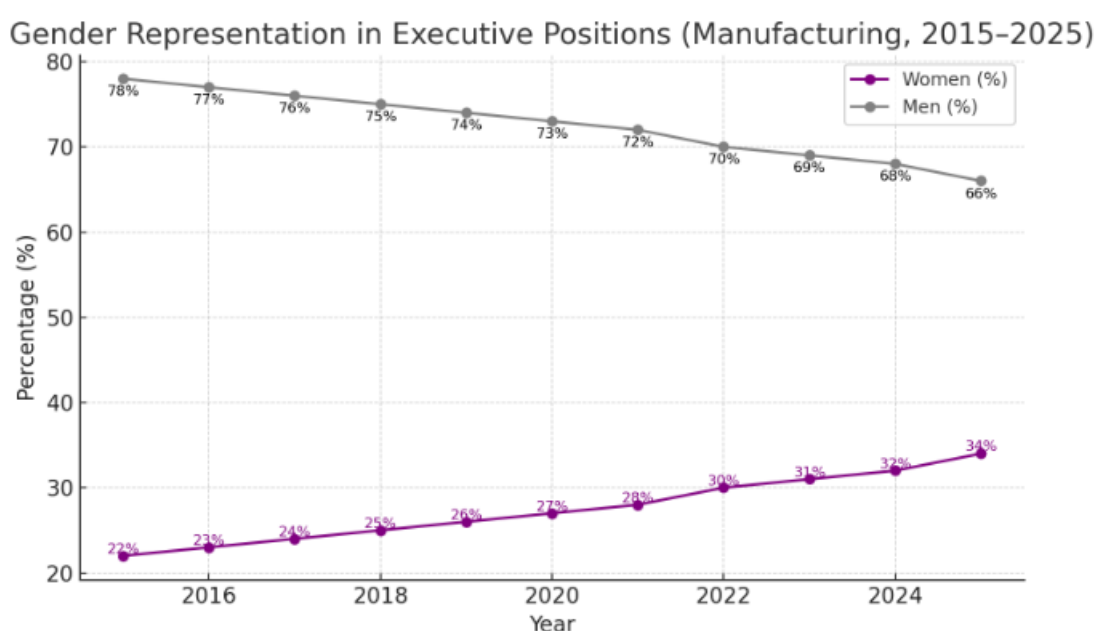


Figure 2.3: Gender representation in executive position

Source: Thornton, 2025

The 40% women quota on boards in Norway, established in 2008, has inspired similar measures in other nations, yielding positive but variable results (Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). The B-BBEE Act in South Africa has promoted gender and racial inclusion in corporate governance and ownership structures, encouraging businesses to diversify

their leadership and ownership profiles (DTIC, 2023). Despite these measures, women, especially women of colour, remain under-represented in equity ownership and control of capital assets. Ownership structures primarily favour men, particularly in capital-intensive sectors such as mining, manufacturing, and banking, where institutional and structural barriers persist.

Soraa *et al.* (2019) argued that organisational structures are inherently gendered, suggesting that cosmetic diversity attempts may not lead to meaningful power redistribution without substantial structural reforms. Nevertheless, increased lobbying, transparency requirements, and gender-focused investment funds are beginning to challenge traditional ownership norms (Posel & Casale, 2019). Emerging trends suggest cautious optimism: while equality has not yet been achieved, the push for improved inclusive governance and ownership is gathering momentum, driven by governmental initiatives and grassroots movements.

2.9 INDUSTRIAL POLICY AND FINANCING INDUSTRIALISATION

Hayashi (2010) contended that the fundamental tenet of the progressive state model is state-directed industrialisation. Industrial policy is fundamentally characterised as a governmental strategy aimed at shaping the sectoral allocation of the economy (Stiglitz, Lin & Patel 2013). Industrialisation is primarily defined by a transition from an agrarian economy to one reliant on organisations capable of mass production. Industrialisation is defined as “a process in which the share of industry, particularly manufacturing, in total economic activity is augmented” (Weiss 2002).

Manufacturing, intrinsically associated with developmentalism, is regarded as the primary catalyst for economic growth and advancement. An essential characteristic of a developing nation is its capacity to finance industry. Industrialisation and innovation necessitate time and are frequently unpredictable, and as Mazzucato (2015) asserted, 'patient capital' is essential for the thorough advancement of radical inventions.

The topic of industrial policy and the financing of industrialisation is discussed at the hand of sanctions and global isolations, inequitable infrastructure development, and calls for the transformation of the manufacturing sector.

2.9.1 Call for transformation of the manufacturing sector

The imperative to emancipate Black individuals was continually associated with the ANC's goals during the liberation struggle throughout the National Democratic Revolution (Jeffery, 2016). Black Economic Empowerment is a project designed to empower historically underprivileged South Africans by facilitating the transfer of ownership, management, and financial control of firms, together with the comprehensive transfer of skills and the broad provision of employment opportunities. Although this is the intended purpose of BEE, its execution has been regarded as a hindrance to economic advancement and liberalisation (Brunette, Klaaren & Nqaba 2019).

The redistribution of SOEs to advantage corrupt officials and the misappropriation of funds designated for Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) have led to corruption, prompting an investigation into claims of state capture, corruption, and fraud within the public sector, including state entities (Klaaren, 2021). Observations indicate that businesses experience the policy as onerous, hence, hindering the nation's economy and prospects for reform (Krüger, 2011). This incited calls for the government to comprehensively reevaluate its reform strategy, especially regarding the execution of BEE policies, which appear to lack credibility and receive scant support from corporate managers in South Africa (Krüger 2011:232).

BEE has often been analysed as consisting of three separate phases, suggesting that the government's strategy towards BEE is progressive. The first of these phases is discussed in the next section.

2.10 INITIAL PHASE OF BEE: INCORPORATING AFFLUENT BLACK INDIVIDUALS INTO THE ECONOMY

Subsequent to the ending of apartheid, SOEs emerged as business entities capable of facilitating reform. The ANC government acknowledged these entities as essential participants in BEE. Kurtz (2001) recognised the primary concern as the financial expenditure required to privatise these deeply indebted, formerly state-owned enterprises into private ownership. Subsequent to this, South African financial institutions created special purpose organisations (SPVs) to promote BEE. The objective was to enhance BEE by granting Black investors voting power in the SPV

via ordinary shares, notwithstanding a significant share of the advantages accruing to financial institutions (Kurtz, 2001).

This restricted BEE asserted that once Black persons acquired money or equity from sought-after enterprises, they could facilitate transformation by appointing more Black individuals to high positions, thereby effecting genuine change (Andrews, 2008). This is entirely erroneous, both theoretically and practically. The initial wave led to the cosmetic incorporation of a limited number of Black individuals onto the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) via the acquisition of equity shares from predominantly white-owned enterprises. During this period, BEE primarily entailed the transfer of shares from corporations to politically connected individuals who amassed considerable wealth, and occupied multiple corporate directorships, yet predominantly lacked the entrepreneurial acumen or expertise necessary to foster economic growth for the benefit of other Black individuals (Tangri & Southall, 2008).

The initial five years of democracy and BEE resulted in an increasing disparity among Black businesses. On one side were BEE pioneers, self-made entrepreneurs who exhibited greater autonomy in their quest for wealth. They expressed scepticism towards the politically affiliated Black elite, the unemployed, and the labour movement. Conversely, certain politicians transformed into entrepreneurs, pursuing profit while endorsing greater government action. These individuals urged the state to implement additional legislation and policies to direct the economy towards supporting Black individuals (Iheduru, 2004). The government failed to foresee a policy aimed at incorporating Black individuals into some sectors, such as manufacturing, under their framework of BEE. At that time, BEE was excessively limited and mainly catered to the interests of the politically linked business elite. By the conclusion of the first decade of the 21st century, it was evident that BEE had inadequately facilitated the integration of a substantial number of Black entrepreneurs into the commercial sector (Matumba & Mondliwa 2015).

The government's objective was to expand the economy; an objective that could be realised through industrialisation (RSA, 2015a). The Black Industrialists Policy (BIP) is a South African governmental effort aimed at concurrently advancing both BEE and the nation's industrialisation. The 2013 Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP) asserted that industrial policy must prioritise the development of predominantly Black-owned and managed manufacturing enterprises demonstrating a long-term commitment to

the sector (RSA 2018:13). This programme would implement a targeted plan to incorporate Black individuals into industrial sectors and provide support through financial and non-financial means, as specified in the amended BEE policy and the National Industrial Policy Framework (NIPF) (RSA 2015b). The government stated that financing would derive from syndicated loans, grant funding from the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC) for working capital, targeted incentive programmes from the DTIC, procurement allocations from SOEs, and government funding (RSA 2015b).

2.10.1 Black Economic Empowerment Commission and Charters

The Black Economic Empowerment Commission (BEEComm) was founded to consolidate the business sector, government, and civil society (BEE-Commission, 2001). The commission advocated for a more robust and focused governmental initiative to facilitate the transition. The terms of reference encompassed, among other objectives, the formulation of a coherent and cohesive vision and strategy for BEE, situating the project within the wider framework of South African societal reform, and investigating methods for Black enterprises to articulate a collective voice. This was an essential step, as the Commission assumed the role of rectifying any potential deficiencies in a comprehensive BEE policy. The Commission advocated for the concept of B-BBEE (BEE-Commission 2001).

The Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act of 2003 was enacted subsequent to the Commission's findings. This legislation sought to facilitate economic transformation and to guarantee substantial involvement of Black individuals in the economy, thereby modifying the racial dynamics of ownership and management (Jack 2007). The BEE Commission promoted extensive empowerment, highlighting the acknowledgement of Black disenfranchisement and the necessity for de-racialisation, while simultaneously advocating for the incorporation of the complete diversity of South African enterprises (Southall, 2003).

Subsequent to the Commission, the government endeavoured to broaden the parameters of BEE and exerted pressure on corporations to implement transformation and embrace a comprehensive strategy. The second phase was significant as it integrated BEE with departmental and industry transformation charters to expedite

transformation in partnership with industry leaders (Desai & Maharaj, 2008; Hamann, Khagram & Rohan, 2008).

2.10.1.1 Policy and legislative framework governing the manufacturing sector

South African manufacturing is regulated by a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework aimed at industrialisation, economic transformation and sustainable development. The National Industrial Policy Framework (NIPF) guides the strategic direction for industrial growth through diversification, labour intensive manufacturing, export promotion and skills development, while the Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP) operationalises these objectives through sector specific interventions (DTIC, 2020).

But from an African feminist perspective, the effectiveness of industrial policies should not be measured only by economic growth indicators, but also by whether such policies address the historical and structural inequalities that affect women. African feminism argues that women's experiences of exclusion are determined by the interlocking systems of race, gender, class and socio-economic disadvantage. The NIPF and IPAP policies aim to increase industrial involvement and generate employment, but they do not specifically question whether industrial growth prospects are distributed equally between men and women within the manufacturing environments. If current organisational cultures, leadership structures and gendered occupational patterns continue to favour men then increased industrialisation does not necessarily imply equal opportunities for women to advance. Thus, industrial policy can improve economic performance while replicating inequality in the representation of leaders and in leadership positions for decision-making.

2.10.1.2 The government initiated the Manufacturing Competitiveness Enhancement Programme (MCEP)

The Manufacturing Competitiveness Enhancement Programme (MCEP) offers financial and non-financial support to firms to facilitate sustainable production, capital investment and market expansion (DTIC, 2019). The B-BBEE Act (Act No. 53 of 2003) was introduced to address the historical imbalances by encouraging broader economic participation by the previously disadvantaged groups (Republic of South Africa, 2003).

From an African feminist perspective, although B-BBEE has made significant progress towards racial transformation, there are questions as to whether gender inequalities are sufficiently addressed in its implementation. African feminism puts forward the view

that black women are marginalised in more than one way due to the intersection of racial and gender inequalities. B-BBEE does call for ownership, management control and skills development, but implementation is often done in broad strokes. The focus is on racial representation, without critically considering whether women are benefiting equally from transformation initiatives. For example, organisations may have improved demographic representation while leadership and executive roles are still dominated by men. In addition, enterprise development initiatives may favour male-owned businesses or reinforce existing power structures. Thus, compliance with B-BBEE requirements does not necessarily translate into the meaningful inclusion of women in executive leadership positions.

2.10.1.3 Labour legislation

Labour legislation is an integral part of the manufacturing environment. The Labour Relations Act and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act which set down minimum labour standards, govern collective bargaining and dispute resolution. The Occupational Health and Safety Act is to promote safety in the workplace, and the Employment Equity Act is to remove unfair discrimination and to create equal opportunities (Republic of South Africa. 1993; 1995; 1997; 1998).

Labour legislation should be critiqued from an African feminist perspective, which questions whether formal equality translates into substantive equality for women. These laws do offer protections and rights, but African feminism argues that merely obeying the law may not change the cultures underlying the workplace that promote gender inequalities. There are legal protections for women, but they can continue to face barriers such as exclusion from informal networks, limited access to opportunities for leadership and inequality in the workplace. In addition, collective bargaining structures and organisational decision-making systems may still mirror male-dominated perspectives which do not acknowledge the specific experiences of women in manufacturing environments. This, in turn, opens up the possibility of generating legal rights through labour legislation that do not fundamentally change organisational practices that hinder women's access to leadership positions.

2.10.1.4 Manufacturing environmental sustainability

The National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) governs manufacturing environmental sustainability in which organisations are required to conduct

environmental impact assessment and reduce ecological damage (Republic of South Africa, 1998). Other regulations like the Air Quality Act and Water Act promote sustainable industrial practices. Environmental sustainability must be viewed from the perspective of social justice issues from an African feminist perspective. African feminism acknowledges that environmental problems and industrial activities impact communities differently because of pre-existing social inequalities. Unequal access to resources and socio-economic conditions may mean women experience environmental risks in a disproportionate way. Furthermore, decisions about environmental sustainability in manufacturing firms are often made at senior management levels, which have still low representation of women. Therefore, policies on environmental sustainability should also consider whether women are equally involved in strategic decision-making processes on sustainable industrial practices.

2.10.1.5 Skills Development Act (Act No. 97 of 1998) and the Skills Development Levies Act (Act No. 9 of 1999)

The Skills Development Act (Act No. 97 of 1998) and the Skills Development Levies Act (Act No. 9 of 1999) provide a framework for the development of human capital through skills training initiatives. The Acts support SETAs such as merSETA in the co-ordination of apprenticeships, learnerships and occupational training programmes (Republic of South Africa, 1998b; 1999).

African feminism would argue that the critical issue is not the existence of training programmes, but how resources are distributed. African feminism highlights that access to opportunities is determined by historical and structural inequalities. In manufacturing organisations, skills investments may be skewed disproportionately to technical and operational training in traditionally male-dominated fields. Thus, women may receive less leadership development, mentoring, sponsorship, and executive succession opportunities. As a result, even where training budgets are available in theory, unequal implementation may contribute to occupational segregation and limit women to senior leadership positions.

2.10.1.6 Trade and investment

Trade and investment policies are formulated to encourage manufacturing growth through legislation on imports, exports, foreign direct investment and industrial

development initiatives such as Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and EMIA programmes (DTIC, 2020).

African feminism also demands that investment policies be analysed in terms of who benefits from opportunities for industrial expansion. “Economic growth driven by trade and investment does not automatically result in equitable benefits for women. Foreign investment can generate employment that still entraps workers in lower operational roles rather than leadership pathways. Women-owned enterprises can also face barriers to accessing investment resources and supply chain opportunities. Hence, African feminism argues that investment policies should be assessed not only on economic outcomes but also on their impact on gender inclusion and representation in leadership.

2.10.1.7 Competition in the manufacturing sector

Legislation is used to control competition in the manufacturing sector to control monopolistic behaviour and ensure fair market practices (Competition Commission, 2018). From an African feminist perspective, promoting market competition alone may not necessarily result in equitable opportunities for women. African feminism argues that even with economic reforms, structural inequalities often remain. Although increased competition can lead to improved productivity and efficiency in the market, without concerted gender-responsive implementation, women are likely to continue to encounter barriers in accessing leadership positions, entrepreneurial opportunities and roles in strategic decision-making. Hence, market fairness must also include equitable participation and representation in organisational structures.

2.10.2 Employment, skills, and trade dynamics

The ILO (2022) indicated that manufacturing employs around 470 million individuals globally, or nearly 13% of the overall workforce. The manufacturing industry offers essential employment prospects for the middle-income sector but encounters considerable obstacles from automation and changing skills demands. Resolving these challenges necessitates comprehensive reforms in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), improved public–private collaborations, and incentives to promote workforce upskilling (SEIFSA, 2023).

Manufacturing constitutes over 70% of worldwide merchandise exports (WTO, 2023). The automotive sector, with firms like Toyota South Africa Motors, BMW South Africa, and Volkswagen South Africa, spearheads South Africa's manufacturing exports, alongside sub-sectors such as food processing, textiles, chemicals, and processed minerals (NAAMSA, 2023), as illustrated in Table 3.1. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents a strategic opportunity to enhance regional value chains and diversify exports (Tralac, 2023).

2.10.3 Informalisation and precarity of women's work

A further concern is the rising informalisation of industrial work, particularly in sectors such as clothes, textiles and footwear (Ervin, Taouk, Hewitt & King, 2023). Women are inadequately represented in these sectors, and frequently engage in informal employment or subcontracting, resulting in restricted access to social protections or legal recourse (ILO, 2019). Remote and contractual employment jeopardises income security and career advancement, hindering women's access to the formal sector and constraining their prospects for skill enhancement (Singh & Kumari, 2024).

The feminisation of precarious employment in manufacturing highlights the necessity for specific policy interventions that need to encompass the formal acknowledgement of informal employment, the enhancement of labour rights enforcement, and the execution of gender-sensitive industrial strategies that tackle the systemic vulnerabilities encountered by women in the labour market.

2.10.4 4th Industrial Revolution

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the growing automation of manufacturing processes pose both difficulties and opportunities for gender equality. Automation poses the risk of displacing numerous routine and manual occupations that are predominantly occupied by women. Conversely, technology innovation can transform workforce strategies and rectify historical disparities by promoting gender-inclusive skills development (Srai & Christodoulou, 2021).

As explained in the above paragraph, the 4IR and automation present both risks and opportunities. On one side, they may displace jobs mainly held by women; on the other, they offer a chance to reshape skills development and inclusion efforts. However, gender-neutral policies often overlook the systemic disparities that prevent

women's full participation in industrial innovation and technical progress. For example, Bosch *et al.* (2020) found that women managers in South African factories frequently had to deal with male coworkers and subordinates who questioned their authority or competence. Additionally, it is difficult for women to stay long-term in the industry because of a lack of gender-sensitive policies such as maternity leave, childcare facilities, or flexible schedules (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2019a).

The World Economic Forum (2021) stated that women have limited opportunities in emerging industries such as smart manufacturing, additive manufacturing (3D printing). However, the majority of contemporary technology and innovation policies are gender-neutral, which may inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities, unless they are deliberately crafted to empower women. Crucial measures, such as STEM education for females, mentorship for women in engineering and leadership positions, and inclusive workplace technology, are vital to prevent the marginalisation of women in the expanding digital industrial sector.

The manufacturing sectors are pivotal in incorporating technology into their operations and equipping people for a digital future (Backfisch, Lachner, Hische & Scheiter, 2020; Lachner, Backfisch & Scheiter, 2024). Despite the industrial sector's longstanding focus on this issue (Eberle, 1997) and the fact that certain advancements have been made, there are still some barriers. For example, training people to proficiently utilise digital technology in the industry continues to pose a barrier (Nagel *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to have an understanding of the characteristics that facilitate successful technology adoption in manufacturing.

Various technological models exist (Niederhauser & Lindstrom, 2018), typically differentiating between personal or associated characteristics, and contextual elements. Regarding personal aspects, in addition to age, gender, technology usage, and tenure, employees typically distinguish between value beliefs and ability beliefs (Backfisch *et al.*, 2021). The latter is frequently assessed via self-reported data concerning perceived competence and is not differentiated from ability beliefs (Cheng *et al.*, 2020). Established frameworks for technology integration influenced by individual characteristics comprise the technology acceptance model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) and the will-skill-tool-pedagogy (WSTP) model (Knezek & Christensen, 2016).

The manufacturing sector has concentrated on infrastructure (Gil-Flores *et al.*, 2017) and aspects such as formal and informal training, collaborative opportunities, manufacturing culture, and leadership styles (Dexter, 2018; Dexter & Richardson, 2020; Petko *et al.*, 2018). Numerous studies have investigated these factors across various sector levels.

2.11 GLOBAL TRENDS IN MANUFACTURING AND INDUSTRIALISATION

As per UNIDO (2023), the manufacturing sector constitutes roughly 16–20% of global GDP and acts as a crucial catalyst for growth and structural transformation. Moreover, competitiveness (World Bank, 2023) indicates that prominent manufacturing economies, including China, the US, Germany, Japan, and South Korea, have leveraged the sector to attain technical innovation, augment productivity, and bolster trade competitiveness. The World Bank (2023) observed that these nations have embraced sophisticated industrial technology and engaged in workforce development to sustain their global pre-eminence.

Rodrik (2016) asserted that in emerging economies, manufacturing is pivotal for the transition from low-productivity agricultural to higher-value industrial sectors. Export-oriented manufacturing, particularly in Asia, has been essential in fostering economic growth and reducing poverty. Vietnam and Malaysia have effectively executed industrial plans and allocated resources to education and infrastructure to establish themselves as global manufacturing centres.

Numerous recent research studies have contested this longstanding notion. Certain scholars seeking to corroborate Kaldor's law (Fagerberg & Verspagen, 2002; Szirmai, 2013; Szirmai & Verspagen, 2015) discovered that after 1990, manufacturing emerged as a more challenging avenue for growth than was previously the case. Manufacturing was no longer functioning as the exclusive catalyst for learning and productivity enhancement that it formerly represented. Some scholars have emphasised the growing significance of services (Hauge & Chang, 2019) and agriculture (Cramer & Chisoro-Dube, 2021) in the advancement of late industrialising nations.

Numerous studies have delineated the industrialisation process inside the contemporary global economy. Whittaker *et al.* (2020:6) proposed the concept of

'compressed' development, characterised by global integration in which “developed countries experience ongoing structural transformation, outsourcing, and offshoring while competing with emerging nations”. This novel approach presents significant challenges for late industrialising nations (Szirmai, 2015; Cantore *et al.*, 2017; Romano and Traù, 2017).

Since the 1980s and the commencement of the second unbundling of globalisation (Baldwin, 2011), offshore operations have proliferated, and the allocation of production within global value chains (GVCs) has become increasingly prevalent. The contemporary global economy is defined by a hierarchical division of manufacturing processes into distinct activities that can be executed in various locations by different firms (Feenstra, 1998). In this setting, the paradigm of industrialisation has evolved: contemporary industrialised states have developed varied productive capacities to create a comprehensive industrial foundation, whilst developing countries are directly assimilated into established value chains.

Baldwin (2011) analysed the distinction between constructing and engaging in a value chain. This novel industrialisation strategy, which entails integrating into existing value chains, presents emerging nations with fresh prospects: despite constrained resources, they can engage in global commerce and attain industrialisation without the necessity of establishing a complete commercial sector (Baldwin, 2012). By concentrating on a particular segment of the value chain, nations are not required to obtain all upstream and downstream competencies (Cattaneo *et al.*, 2013; UNCTAD, 2013). Baldwin (2012) asserted that value networks accelerate and facilitate industrialisation. Baldwin (2011) also interrogated the importance of this industrialisation pattern. Similarly, Whittaker *et al.*, (2020) characterised compressed development as a 'accelerated development' that renders the conventional 'stages' of development obsolete.

In development economics, manufacturing is seen as a driver of economic growth due to its intrinsic attributes. Three salient aspects can be emphasised: (i) the significance of intersectoral links; (ii) the pre-eminence of manufacturing regarding productivity, which underpins the foundational framework of development economics previously discussed; and (iii) the potential to cultivate productive skills. These attributes are crucial for industrialisation to establish a beneficial cycle of productive transformation. In a globalised economy characterised by fierce international rivalry, swift trade

liberalisation, and widespread outsourcing and offshoring, the efficacy of the above-mentioned three aspects may be reduced.

Whittaker *et al.* (2020) contended that industrialisation has become 'thin' or 'partial' due to changes in manufacturing, marked by a narrow spectrum of manufacturing sectors, constrained domestic inter-industry connections, and the dissociation of production from innovation. The manufacturing sector has historically been regarded as a substantial source of externalities owing to its robust interconnections with other economic sectors.

2.12 THE MANUFACTURING SECTOR AS KEY DRIVER OF ECONOMIC GROWTH

This section contributes to the understanding of women's upward mobility by providing the economic and industrial context in which women's career progression occurs. Manufacturing is an important component of the economic structure of South Africa that champions development and prosperity (Maphisa *et al.*, 2024). This has a big impact on the country's GDP, employment figures and export earnings (Creamer *et al.*, 2012). Historically, the South African government has recognised the manufacturing sector and some sub-industries as key drivers of economic growth and job creation through a variety of macroeconomic and industrial policies (Lefophane, 2024).

Table 2.1 delineates the contribution of the subsectors of the manufacturing industry to the economy.

Table 2.1: Contribution of manufacturing subsectors to South Africa's economy

Subsector	Description	GDP contribution (% of manufacturing GDP)	Economic contribution
Food, Beverages and Tobacco	Processing of meat, dairy, beverages, tobacco, etc.	~25–28%	Major employer; supports agriculture; strong export potential (e.g., wine, processed foods).
Petroleum, Chemicals and Rubber	Includes petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, plastics, rubber products	~23–25%	High value-added; supports mining & energy; key to industrial and consumer goods supply chains.
Basic Iron and Steel, Metal Products	Steel production, foundries, metal component manufacturing	~17–19%	Strategic for construction, mining, and automotive industries.
Motor Vehicles, Parts and Accessories	Vehicle assembly, parts and accessories production	~10–12%	Vital export sector; high-tech manufacturing; significant FDI (mainly from Germany, Japan, US).
Wood, Paper, Publishing and Printing	Production of paper, pulp, and publishing services	~5–6%	Supports education, packaging, and media sectors.
Textiles, Clothing, Leather and Footwear	Includes fabric, garments, and shoes	~3–4%	Labour-intensive; supports township economies and SMMEs; vulnerable to import competition.
Glass, Non-metallic Mineral Products	Includes cement, glassware, and ceramics	~2–3%	Supplies construction and housing sectors; important for infrastructure development.
Electrical Machinery and Equipment	Manufacturing of power generation, transmission, and household electrical items	~2–3%	Supports renewable energy, automation, and mining electrification efforts.
Furniture and Other Manufacturing	Furniture, jewellery, toys, etc.	~1–2%	Supports local entrepreneurship; furniture exports growing regionally.
Other Transport Equipment	Includes aircraft, boats, railway rolling stock	<1%	Small but strategic; supports logistics and aerospace sectors.

Source: Researcher's own compilation

However, despite its economic significance, the industry has encountered significant obstacles that hinder its ability to realise its potential in fostering economic growth and creating employment opportunities (Lefophane, 2024). These issues include elevated input costs, labour market inflexibilities, skills shortages, talent discrepancies, and substantial import competition, these obstacles require comprehensive governmental strategies to resolve them (Lefophane, 2024).

South Africa has seen premature deindustrialisation, characterised by the growth of the financial sector at the cost of investment in productive capacity and infrastructure, resulting in ongoing difficulties in job creation and livelihood assistance (Bell *et al.*, 2017). This trend is further intensified by the persistent focus on resource-based sectors instead of industry-driven growth, a hallmark of numerous medium and upper-middle-income nations (Bell *et al.*, 2017). The dependence on primary industries, such as agriculture and mining for economic stimulation, although historically important, has clearly diminished progress in other vital areas (Niyimbanira *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, a comprehensive examination of certain manufacturing subsectors is essential for comprehending their diverse contributions and pinpointing targeted measures to counteract this tendency (Bell *et al.*, 2017). To this end, Driver's (2023) study assessed the success of South African manufacturing over a 25-year period, utilising an aggregated sample of enterprises to analyse variables including employment, mark-ups, exports, domestic sales, and investment.

The premature de-industrialisation seen in South Africa has resulted in inadequate investment in productive capacity and infrastructure (Bell *et al.*, 2017). This approach has resulted in elevated concentration levels and profitability in certain sectors; however, it has not provided extensive economic advantages, starkly contrasting with the 'better life for all' pledged during the post-apartheid change (Bell *et al.*, 2017). The situation known as 'profitability without investment' signifies that economic gains have not resulted in the sustained capital accumulation required for structural change and inclusive industrial development (Andreoni *et al.*, 2021). Under such conditions, organisations may prioritise operational sustainability over talent development, succession planning, and diversity initiatives, potentially limiting advancement opportunities for women.

The restricted efficacy of industrial strategies in fostering extensive economic development and employment generation highlights the necessity for a more holistic

and strategically coordinated policy framework that transcends basic macroeconomic stabilisation (Lefophane, 2024; Wuttke, 2023). For example, early post-apartheid economic policies, including the RDP and the GEAR strategy, predominantly neglected the intricate needs for industrial restructuring, prioritising instead general macroeconomic stability and liberalisation (Hartmann *et al.*, 2021; Wuttke, 2023). These strategies, although they addressed urgent post-apartheid issues, failed to sufficiently cultivate the complex interconnections and supportive ecosystems necessary for the growth and diversification of sophisticated manufacturing in South Africa (Wuttke, 2023) (Lefophane, 2024).

2.13 COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: SOUTH AFRICA, BRICS, AND EMERGING MANUFACTURING ECONOMIES

The use of the BRICS as a comparative benchmark is justified by the fact that South Africa is a member of the BRICS economic bloc and is an emerging economy facing developmental and industrialisation challenges like those of other BRICS nations. BRICS economies have shared common characteristics, which are different from developed economies, such as economic transformation and industrial restructuring, socio-economic inequality, labour market disparities and efforts to increase women's participation in economic and leadership activities (World Bank, 2023; UNIDO, 2023). As such, comparisons of South Africa with other BRICS countries provide a more contextually relevant basis for understanding industrial development and gender inclusion than comparisons with highly industrialised developed economies. BRICS countries are also among the world's most influential emerging manufacturing economies and have adopted different approaches to industrial policy, skills development and gender equality initiatives (Andreoni & Tregenna, 2020; UNIDO, 2023). By exploring these experiences, it may be possible to develop a more nuanced assessment of the manufacturing sector in South Africa and gain valuable insights into strategies that might help to increase women's participation and advancement in managerial and executive roles.

The BRICS comparison is particularly relevant for the present study, as it enables an understanding of how industrial development, labour market structures and gender inclusion initiatives influence women's advancement into leadership roles in emerging economies (ILO, 2022; World Bank, 2023). It also offers a forum for the identification

of lessons and best practices that may contribute to the development of a contextually relevant talent management framework for the advancement of women into executive management positions in South Africa's manufacturing industry (Andreoni & Tregenna, 2020; Chatterjee & Deacon, 2022).

The World Bank (2023) emphasised that South Africa, the most industrialised nation in Sub-Saharan Africa and a member of BRICS, possesses a distinctive position in both regional and global manufacturing industries. In comparison to its BRICS counterparts, namely, Brazil, Russia, India, and China, South Africa's manufacturing sector is very minor, accounting for roughly 13% of GDP in recent years, whereas China's exceeds 25%, and Brazil and India range between 15% and 20%.

Furthermore, the World Bank (2023) highlighted that this negligible percentage signifies both historical obstacles, including apartheid-era industrial exclusion, and current concerns such as deindustrialisation, energy limitations, and insufficient investment in advanced manufacturing. Notwithstanding these challenges, South Africa continues to be a vital regional industrial centre, especially in the automotive, agro-processing, and metals sectors.

Regarding gender inclusion, South Africa surpasses other Sub-Saharan African nations owing to a comprehensive legislative framework that fosters gender equality, encompassing the Employment Equity Act and B-BBEE initiatives. However, in contrast to the BRICS nations, particularly China and India, South Africa exhibits inadequate female participation in manufacturing. Women in South Africa are inadequately represented in high-skill industrial positions and leadership roles, reflecting patterns observed globally in developing nations (ILO, 2022). Conversely, nations such as China have achieved significant progress in incorporating women into the light manufacturing and electronics industries, albeit occasionally in precarious working conditions.

Newman *et al.* (2016) and Page (2018) both contended that Sub-Saharan Africa perpetually faces impediments to industrialisation owing to infrastructural deficiencies, restricted financial access, political volatility, and the excessive dependence on primary commodities. Blackden and Wodon (2021) noted that, in several nations, the manufacturing sector constitutes less than 10% of GDP, with women predominantly engaged in informal, low-wage, and labour-intensive industries such as textiles, food

processing, and artisanal production. Whitfield *et al.* (2020) indicated that countries such as Ethiopia have experienced swift industrial expansion via export-oriented policies centred on textile production, characterised by significant female employment. Nonetheless, these advancements can undermine labour rights, as women are predominantly employed in low-skill, low-wage roles, and face limited opportunities for advancement (Staritz and Whitfield, 2017).

Rustomjee (2020) expounded upon the premise presented by UNIDO (2019), arguing that South Africa is at a pivotal juncture. Despite the existence of a regulatory framework and institutional capacities that promote gender-sensitive industrial development, a significant implementation gap remains. Compared to its BRICS counterparts, South Africa has a deficiency in industrial innovation and the execution of a gender-responsive industrial strategy (Andreoni & Tregenna, 2020). Notwithstanding its superior institutions and infrastructure compared to regional peers, it has not successfully used these advantages to mitigate gender disparities in the industrial sector (Chatterjee & Deacon, 2022). Blackden and Wodon (2021) and UN Women (2020) contended that this shortcoming requires deliberate policy formulation that incorporates intersectional gender analysis, employs regionally informed benchmarks, and prioritises investment in women's skill development, leadership representation, and equitable access to industrial value chains.

An analysis of South Africa's industrial performance in comparison to its BRICS counterparts, Brazil, Russia, India, and China, as well as other Sub-Saharan African nations reveals critical insights into its competitive position. Unlike China and India, which have leveraged large-scale manufacturing to enhance employment and export-led growth, South Africa has encountered difficulties in implementing mass production for analogous objectives, due to comparatively high labour costs, persistent structural rigidities, and restricted industrial diversification (UNIDO, 2023; Tregenna, 2016). The country's manufacturing output mostly centres on a narrow spectrum of capital-intensive sectors, such as automotive assembly, chemicals, and food processing, which exhibit poorer labour absorption and diminished inclusivity in job creation (Black & Roberts, 2015).

Relative to the rest of the African continent, South Africa possesses a more advanced industrial infrastructure, a competent workforce, and greater technological expertise (UNCTAD, 2022). However, it faces increasing competition from countries like

Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria, who are progressing through investments in labour-intensive sectors, such as textiles, agro-processing, and digital manufacturing (Signé, 2018). These economies benefit from their youthful demography, flexible labour policies, and proactive industrial policy experimentation. Signé and Johnson (2021) asserted that these emerging African states demonstrate how tailored policy frameworks and investment in human capital may stimulate rapid industrial growth, despite having fewer historical advantages.

To sustain and augment its industrial superiority, South Africa must transition towards more value addition, innovation, and social inclusivity. This involves including historically marginalised groups, specifically women and youth, into industrial planning and workforce development activities. Turok (2020) asserted that competitive advantage in the 21st century is dictated not merely by access to raw materials and physical capital, but increasingly by institutional effectiveness, adaptability, and cohesive socio-economic frameworks. Thus, inclusive industrialisation is not merely a moral need but also a strategic necessity for maintaining long-term competitiveness in an evolving global economy.

2.14 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

While progress has been made, notably in some sectors and regions, the institutional and cultural barriers that limit women's opportunities for executive managerial positions remain deeply embedded. Gender parity requires a comprehensive approach including government initiatives, changes in cultural perceptions and changes in organisational processes. Women's leadership development must go beyond skills acquisition to address the biases and institutional factors that shape their experiences. Without significant change, efforts to achieve real equality at the top will continue to deliver more modest than transformational results.

CHAPTER 3:

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature review provides a detailed synthesis of the existing research and academic work, critically evaluating and comparing previous studies to identify patterns, recognise scholarly contributions, and prevent repetition (Kennedy, 2007; Garg, 2016; Mouton, 2017). According to Webster and Watson (2002), the importance of the literature review cannot be underestimated, as it clarifies the research scope, establishes a foundation of existing knowledge, and outlines the theoretical basis of the study. In terms of knowledge management, the focus the current study extended beyond abstract theory to the gaining of a deeper understanding of women's progress in reaching top leadership roles within the manufacturing industry (Bouhnik & Giat, 2015).

This chapter offers clear insights and discussions of the meso-level framework relevant to this research (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). The conceptual ideas guiding the research, including a comprehensive review of leadership in the manufacturing sector, support the advancement of women into executive roles in South Africa's manufacturing industry. Additionally, the chapter analyses conceptual frameworks that align with the research objectives, while critically engaging with existing literature to build a strong theoretical foundation.

The advancement of women into leadership roles, especially in traditionally male-dominated fields like manufacturing, has been extensively studied both theoretically and empirically (Kurilova & Antipov, 2020). Several interconnected hypotheses have explained the ongoing gender gaps that were identified in these settings (Davis & Silverton, 2020). These include role congruity theory, social role theory, transformational leadership theory, intersectionality, and the glass ceiling concept, each offering important insights into the barriers and opportunities women encounter in reaching leadership positions (Mazzotta & Ferraro, 2020).

3.2 THE MESO-LEVEL FRAMEWORK

The current study adopted the meso-level framework proposed by Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) to gain an understanding of the progression of women within the manufacturing sector. Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) supported a nuanced meso-level approach to investigate the complex dynamics of women in managerial and executive roles in Africa (Acker, 2006). According to Booysen and Nkomo (2010), this approach involves a detailed examination of how macro-environmental factors, such as organisational structures and practices, interact with micro-environmental factors, specifically gender identity. By integrating perspectives from individual, organisational, and societal levels, this meso-level framework aims to reflect the unique socio-historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts that shape the experiences of women in managerial and executive roles across Africa (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Nienaber & Moraka, 2018; Nkomo, 2021).

A meso-level framework highlights the organisational context and institutional processes that shape individual experiences and connect to broader societal impacts. This approach is beneficial for analysing how organisational structures, cultures, and practices influence gender equity and leadership outcomes (Acker, 2006; Booysen & Nkomo, 2010). At the societal level, Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) emphasised that gaining an understanding of gender in African contexts requires an examination of socio-historical, political, cultural, and economic factors. The aforementioned study explored how the history of the manufacturing industry affected gender inequalities in South Africa, demonstrating how societal analysis can yield deeper insights (Moraka, 2024).

At the organisational level, the meso-level approach encourages the focus on how practices, policies, structures, and systems influence women managers and executives (Gursoy & Maier, 2023). Significantly, some researchers (Bethke-Langenegger *et al.*, 2011; Vaiman, Scullion & Collings, 2012) suggested the broadening of this scope to include men's experiences in managerial roles. To this end, Adamson and Kelan (2019) expanded on the organisational analysis to include both genders, fostering a more inclusive understanding of leadership in African organisations

Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) and Anthias (2022) recommended examining the personal traits of women and men in managerial and executive roles, such as their attitudes, behaviours, cultural backgrounds, and gender identities. This comprehensive view of personal factors is crucial for a full understanding of meso-level dynamics (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Nienaber & Moraka, 2018a). Figure 3.1 visually illustrates this meso-level approach, emphasising the interconnectedness of macro and micro-environmental factors impacting women and men in managerial roles in South Africa.

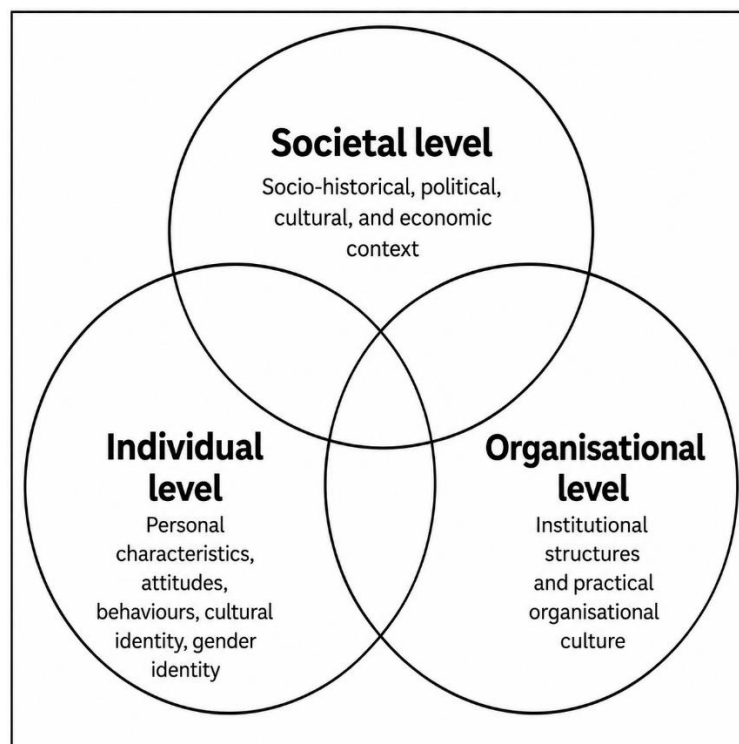


Figure 3.1: A meso-level framework

Source: Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009

Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) argued that the analysis of gender in African settings requires a consideration of the socio-historical, political, cultural, and economic influences. For example, the current study examined how the manufacturing industry historically contributed to gender inequalities in South Africa, demonstrating how societal-level analysis can uncover important insights (Liu & Baker, 2016; Liu, 2018; Ladkin & Patrick, 2022). The current study selected the meso-level framework as it offers a valuable perspective in evaluating the interplay between organisational structures and individual agency.

3.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK BARRIERS TO WOMEN LEADERSHIP ADVANCEMENT

A multi-level theoretical framework was developed to offer a deeper understanding of the multiple and interconnected barriers experienced by women in progressing to management and executive levels (Pike, 2019; Moraka, 2024). The framework was developed as shown in Figure 3.2 to explain the barriers that impede women to rise to managerial executive positions in the manufacturing industry. The study used a multi-level framework which means that women's executive progression is not determined by a single factor but by interrelated influences at the individual, organisational and social level. The individual level focuses on the personal attributes, cognitions, and experiences; the organisational level focuses on structures, systems, policies, and procedures; and the social level focuses on societal, cultural, economic, and historical context.

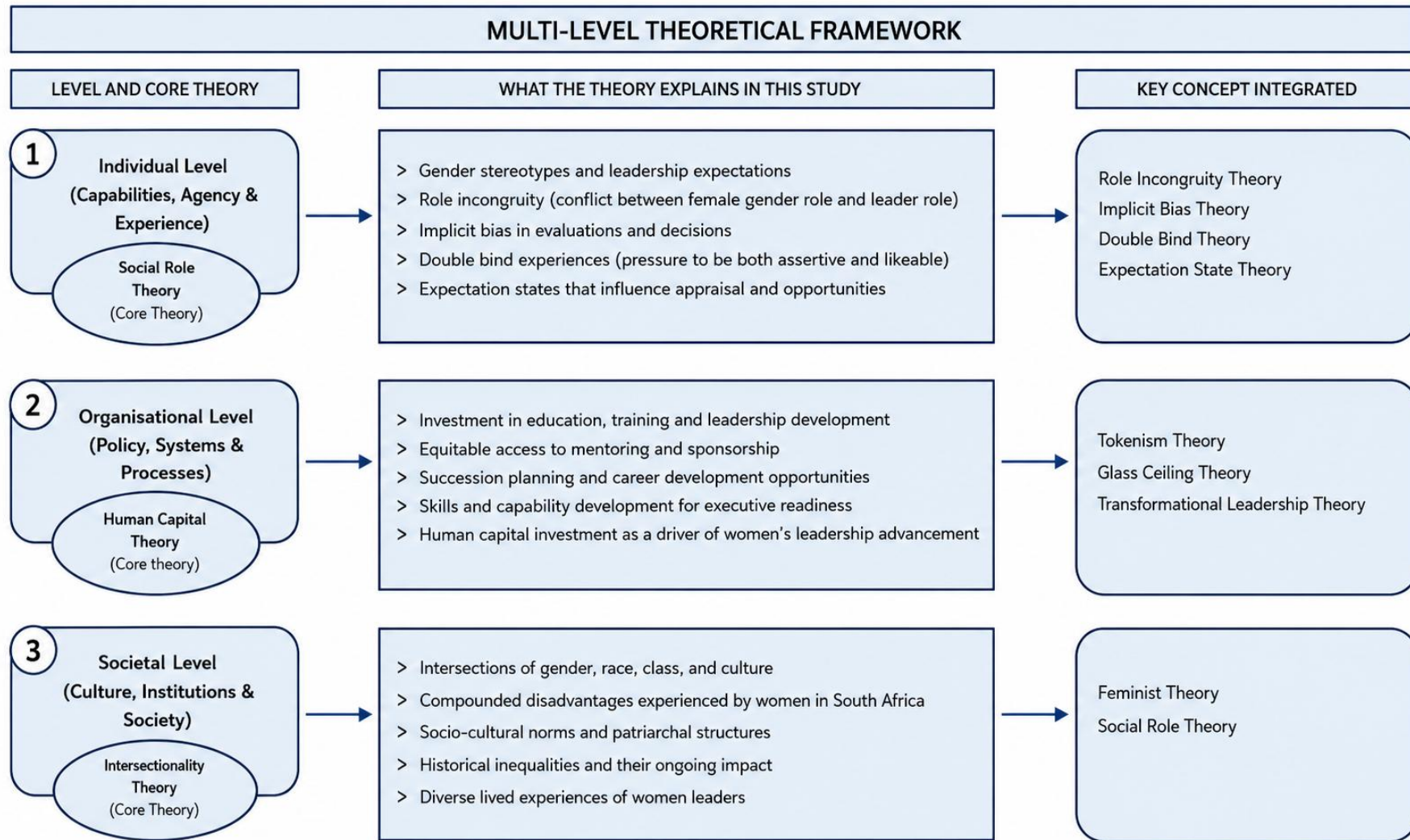


Figure 3.2: Multi-Level Theoretical Framework

Source: Researcher's own compilation.

The use of an integrated multi-level theoretical framework was considered appropriate for the study because talent management and the advancement of women to executive management positions in the South African manufacturing industry are complex phenomena shaped by interconnected individual, organisational, and societal factors. No single theory was sufficient to fully explain the multidimensional barriers impeding women's advancement into managerial executive positions.

Three core theories were employed, which are the primary lens of the study: the first lens, namely the social role theory, which operates under the meso-level framework individual level (Hsu *et al.*, 2021). The social role theory explains how society assigns gendered roles and expectations that shape perceptions, behaviours and opportunities (Curini *et al.*, 2023; Lesch *et al.*, 2023). It also elaborates on role incongruity, which explains the conflict between the female gender role and the leader role, implicit bias in evaluations and decisions, and double bind experiences, which pressure one to be both assertive and likeable women (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Triana, Song, Um & Huang, 2023). Furthermore, it also explains the expectation states that influence appraisal and opportunities. The key concepts integrated under this lens are the role incongruity theory, implicit bias theory, double bind theory and expectation states theory; these theories are conceptualised as manifestations of social role processes (Schnierle, Christian-Brathwaite & Louisias, 2019; Meidert, Bauer & Klink, 2023)

The second lens, namely the human capital theory, operates under the meso-level framework, the organisational level (Martínez-Fierro & Sancho, 2021). The human capital theory explains the invisible structural barriers that limit women's advancement into senior leadership positions. The human capital theory explains the organisational barriers to promotion and progression, exclusion from informal networks and sponsorship, and limited access to high-visibility opportunities (Huaman-Morillo, García & Quispe, 2024). It further elaborates on the tokenisms and under-representation in decision-making roles and structural and policy-related constraints (Schwarzkopf, Voss & Hentschel, 2021). The key concepts are drawn from the tokenism theory as a concept within structural exclusion and glass ceiling theory as a background perspective on career investment (Nash & Moore, 2022). These concepts provide additional insight into organisational mechanisms.

The third primary lens is intersectionality theory, and it is placed in the meso-level framework, the social level (Bauer *et al.*, 2021; Pinem, 2023). Intersectionality theory is the theory that multiple social identities and power structures intersect to create unique experiences of advantage or disadvantage (Thomas *et al.*, 2021). The theory focuses on the intersections of gender, race, class and culture (Thorne, 2024). The compounded disadvantages of women in South Africa. Socio-cultural norms and patriarchal structures (Pinem, 2023; Ivanov, 2024). Historical inequalities and their lingering effects. The varied lived experiences of women leaders, the ideas are influenced by feminist theory as a wider critical approach to power and inequality, social roles and cultural norms research contextual understanding and these ideas lend credence to the perception of social power structures (Mitkus & Jablonskyte, 2025; Bendifallah *et al.*, 2023).

3.4 SOCIAL ROLE THEORY

The social role theory maintains that gender norms in society are primarily responsible for the observed behavioural differences and similarities between the sexes (Eagly & Wood, 2012). According to Eagly and Wood (2016), these stereotypes, also known as gender role views, are the result of people's consistent observations of male and female behaviours, which lead them to deduce similar innate inclinations. According to this theoretical paradigm, these disparities are mostly caused by how men and women are distributed differently among different social functions in a particular community (Eagly & Wood, 2016). For example, in industrialised societies, women are frequently pushed into roles like main carers, homemakers, or nurturing professions, which perpetuates a division of labour that supports these expectations based on roles (Eagly & Wood, 2016).

According to Kosakowska-Berezecka, Besta and Jurek (2022), this distinction has a distal impact on gender socialisation processes, causing people to internalise gendered features and preferences that prepare them for these sex-based positions. As a result, people form self-concepts and behavioural standards that align with these cultural presumptions, which reinforces gender roles and sex-typed behaviours (Rogers, Evans & Hayes, 2019).

According to the social role theory, men's agentic goals, which emphasise assertiveness and dominance, and women's communal concerns, which emphasise interpersonal affiliation, are the main causes of the observed differences in skills and personality traits between men and women that frequently mirror the traditional gender roles (Forgas-Coll, Huertas-García, Andriella & Alenyà, 2021). Cross, Hardin and Gercek-Swing (2023) maintained that this theoretical perspective argues that role-based expectations are not intrinsic but should rather be seen as the result of historical and cultural development.

The social role theory suggests that psychological inequalities between the sexes should decrease as societies move towards greater gender equality. Data showing a decline in gender disparities in agency and communion over time, especially as countries move towards less strict occupational segregation, provide credence to this claim (Hsu *et al.*, 2021).

According to Semaan *et al.* (2019), this theory specifically emphasises how societal gender roles influence people to acquire particular resources and abilities and modify their behaviour to effectively fulfil these roles, therefore conforming to sex-typical expectations. Therefore, gender stereotypes are formed as a result of the continuous observation of men and women filling different social roles, such as males in labour-intensive roles and women in caregiving capacities (Curini *et al.*, 2023; Lesch *et al.*, 2023).

In addition, a two-tiered regulatory system reinforces these stereotypes: an external system of social sanctioning and an internal system where people incorporate gender role norms into their self-concept, directing their choices and sustaining gender-congruent behaviours (Terpstra-Tong, Wong & Chen, 2022). These gendered behaviours and societal expectations are further reinforced by the internalisation of patterns found in past and present gendered divisions of labour, where males are typically associated with agentic behaviours and women with communal behaviours (Hargrave, 2022).

On an agency-community scale, this concept emphasises how gender disparities in social behaviour and related attributes have resulted from the dissimilarity of these roles, which historically place women in the home and men in the public realm (Žuffová, 2022). Servais and Rasmussen (2022) attribute communal traits like

emotional responsiveness and nurturing to femininity, which are often associated with domestic roles, and agentic traits like independence and assertiveness to masculinity, which are often associated with positions of authority.

Various socialisation agents, such as the family, educational institutions, and the media, which inculcate gender-specific behaviours and expectations from a young age, serve to further perpetuate this division of labour (Bisgaard, 2020). Gender stereotypes are based on the 'Big Two' characteristics of social perception community and agency which are a result of these profoundly embedded social roles (Scheifele, Hohmann & Greitemeyer, 2021).

3.4.1 Role incongruity theory

According to the role incongruity theory, when people's social roles deviate from society norms or stereotypes related to their positions, they encounter internal and external conflicts (Rogalin, 2013a). According to Zheng *et al.*, (2018b), the phenomena is especially noticeable when discussing gender and leadership, since bias against women in positions of authority is frequently stoked by the perceived differences between feminine gender norms and leadership archetypes. According to Burton and Weiner (2016), women leaders in particular frequently face a 'double bind', wherein the agentic attributes usually associated with successful leaders, such as power and decisiveness, are incompatible with stereotypically feminine features like being communal or caring (Hoeritz, 2013; Burton & Weiner, 2016). According to this theoretical framework, which was first presented by Eagly and Karau in 2002, bias against female leaders results from a perceived discrepancy between the qualities necessary for leadership jobs and that which society expects from women (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Triana, Song, Um & Huang, 2023).

According to the role incongruity theory, bias arises when there is a perceived discrepancy between the characteristics expected in a particular social role, and the stereotypical features associated with a social group. It was initially created to address the reasons why women encounter prejudice when they hold leadership positions. The stereotyped communal traits that are associated with women clash with the agentic and authoritative traits that are expected of leaders, thereby fostering prejudice against female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The role incongruity theory has been applied to comprehend gender discrimination, especially in managerial roles and industries where men predominate. It draws attention to the ways in which this discrepancy hinders women's job progression by encouraging stereotyped assessments that have a detrimental effect on their prospects and performance perceptions (Heilman, 1983; Lyness & Grotto, 2018; Heilman, Caleo & Manzi, 2024; Heilman, Wallen & Stathatos, 2024).

By investigating how various intersecting social identities and responsibilities can result in comparable incongruities and discriminatory behaviours, recent research has broadened the idea beyond gender. To lessen the detrimental impacts of role incongruity on performance and workplace relations, researchers have also investigated interventions, including respectful leadership and leadership framing (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Van Breukelen, Van der Vlist & Steensma, 2018).

3.4.2 Implicit bias theory

Implicit bias is the term used to describe the automatic and unconscious associations people have, which frequently affect their attitudes and actions without their knowledge or consent (Lin & Li, 2025). In contrast to explicit biases, which are overt and acknowledged views, this type of bias functions outside of a person's conscious control (Staats, 2016). These implicit associations, which result in unintentional judgements or behaviours towards others based on traits like age, gender, race, or appearance, are frequently influenced by societal attitudes and stereotypes acquired through cultural immersion and socialisation (Schnierle, Christian-Brathwaite & Louisias, 2019; Meidert, Bauer & Klink, 2023). Therefore, even when they go against a person's stated beliefs, these unconscious biases can have a significant influence on judgement, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships (Rosenstein & Rosenstein, 2024b).

As a mechanism to comprehend how prejudice and discrimination might appear in systemic ways, the idea has acquired significant traction across a variety of fields, especially in the fields of social psychology and criminal justice reform (Spearlt, 2020). It applies, in particular, in System 1 processing which is efficient and automatic and is the source of implicit biases, in contrast to System 2 decision-making, which is more intentional and laborious (Cunius & Miller, 2023).

Knowledge of this distinction is necessary to gain an understanding of how biases can function below the level of conscious awareness and can affect behaviour in spite of

overt intentions to the opposite (Asma, 2023a, 2023b). In fact, implicit biases are mental associations that, when triggered by demographic characteristics, can influence judgement and behaviour indirectly and without conscious awareness (Greenwald *et al.*, 2022). These unconscious cognitive processes can result in unintended discriminatory behaviours, frequently deviating from an individual's consciously held, egalitarian beliefs (Dossa & Baxter, 2019; Trujillo, 2024a, 2024b).

3.4.3 Double bind theory

The double bind theory, originally proposed by Gregory Bateson and his associates, provides a robust framework for comprehending the development of abnormal communication patterns, and their possible impact on psychological conditions, especially schizophrenia (Bateson *et al.*, 2007). This hypothesis asserts that persons exposed to recurrent contradictory directives, where adherence to one order necessitates the transgression of another, cultivate a significant incapacity for adaptive response, resulting in considerable cognitive and emotional disarray (Bateson *et al.*, 2007).

The idea specifically outlines a scenario in which an individual is unable to succeed, regardless of their activities, due to conflicting demands (Bateson *et al.*, 2007). This contradictory communication framework, frequently seen in deeply intimate interactions like those of a child and parent, requires the differentiation of several message levels, a challenge rendered unfeasible by the intrinsic inconsistencies (Gibney, 2006).

The theoretical framework of the double bind highlights the sequential aspect of contradicting signals, shifting attention from intra-personal trauma to distinctive relationship dynamics within a family unit (Ferreira, 1960). The original formulation of the double bind theory by Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland in 1956 represented a significant milestone in the evolution of family therapy, highlighting the essential importance of communication theory and cybernetics in comprehending intricate human interactions (Cullin, 2006).

The approach has been essential in redirecting psychological research from individual psychopathology to systemic interactional patterns, especially regarding schizophrenia (Fricke, 2018). This theory posited that schizophrenic patients received contradictory messages at various levels of communication from their parents,

resulting in a 'double bind' that hindered appropriate responses and facilitated the emergence of schizophrenic symptoms (Bateson *et al.*, 2007; Lienhard, 2022).

This approach, which was elaborated on by Watzlawick, underscores how being trapped in paradoxical relationships contributes to, if not precipitates, psychological discomfort, including schizophrenia (Weber, 2009). This viewpoint underscores the importance of disrupted and incoherent communication patterns within an organisation as potential causal elements for erroneous learning processes that may result in such conditions (Bateson *et al.*, 2007). Empirical research has corroborated the theory's assertions, demonstrating that contradictory signals induce far greater stress than consistent ones, particularly among clinical groups, who are also prone to exhibit higher double-bind responses (Roy, 1985).

3.4.4 Expectation State Theory

According to the expectation state theory, people's performance expectations for themselves and other people in group interactions are influenced by status traits including gender, race, and education (Hansen, 2014). These expectations, or 'expectation states', then determine the power and prestige order inside the group, hence, influencing social structure, influence, and participation, according to Singla, Dey and Arora (2020). In particular, these expectations stem from both specific status traits, such perceived verbal or mechanical skill, and diffuse status traits, like gender or ethnicity (Singla *et al.*, 2020). These states serve as stable structures that affect social dynamics, competence beliefs, and outcome assessments across people from different backgrounds. As such, they are not just subjective evaluations (Van den Oever & Beerens, 2020).

According to this theoretical framework, people who collaborate on tasks create performance expectations for themselves and their peers based on status qualities that are perceived to be attained and attributed (Berger *et al.*, 1992). This procedure has a large influence on how information is used and shared in groups, especially when there are no clear-cut right answers available for decision-making, which results in biased information sampling (Van den Oever & Beerens, 2020). According to the theory, those with higher initial status are given more opportunities to participate and are seen as more competent, regardless of their true talents. This can result in self-fulfilling prophecies, a factor that the theory also emphasises (Rogalin, 2013b).

According to the expectation state theory, these status cues, which may include socially attributed traits, help to create expectations about the calibre of future task performances of group members (Fu & Jacobs, 2020), which frequently leads to a self-reinforcing cycle in which people with higher status are given more chances to contribute, strengthening their perceived influence and competence within the group (Singla *et al.*, 2020). This dynamic points to a self-sustaining mechanism that reinforces social hierarchies by converting initial status advantages into long-lasting influence regardless of real contributions or proven ability (Cryer, 2024). As a result, these expectations produce a self-fulfilling prophesy in which individuals in higher-status roles make more contributions, get more favourable feedback, and have more sway within the group (Savage & Melamed, 2021).

This phenomenon also applies to situations in which people are implicitly associated with particular skills or traits because of who they are, resulting in disparate assessments, even when their credentials or performance are the same (Corbett, Wullert, Gilmartin & Simard, 2024). These assumptions, which frequently function subconsciously, take the form of 'status beliefs' that people absorb from social structures, and use to determine how much respect to give in future encounters (Cryer, 2024). Through behavioural status interactions, these beliefs which are described as long-lasting perceptions of characteristics, acts, and identities deserving of respect are updated on a regular basis (Cryer, 2024).

3.4.5 Barriers affecting women under individual level

At the individual level, women's capacity to attain leadership roles is shaped by a range of interconnected factors (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). These include challenges such as inadequate career planning, limited skills development opportunities, and more complex issues related to identity, mentorship, and balancing work with personal life (Stamarski & Hing, 2015). Women's navigation of their leadership journeys is influenced by the interaction between broader social constructs and their personal attributes. Drawing on current scholarly research, the next section provides further insight into these dynamics (Risse, 2020).

- *Poor career planning and limited strategic vision*

The lack of effective career planning remains a major obstacle for women aiming for leadership roles. Yasmin and Husna (2020) pointed out that many women do not think

ahead strategically about their careers, often because of cultural norms that prioritise family duties over career ambitions. Jibril (2022) noted that without intentional planning, their chances of reaching senior positions decrease significantly.

According to Dirisu, Iyiola and Ibidunni (2018), successful career development depends on both personal initiative and institutional support, with collaboration being essential. When women lack structured guidance, mentorship, or managerial support, their career paths can become disorganised, and reactive instead of proactive (Yeswa & Kepha, 2019). Meyer (2020) added that this situation results in talent pipelines and succession plans that often fail to properly include certain groups.

- *Lack of skills and skills development opportunities*

Access to training tailored to individual talents remains an ongoing challenge. Mihalčová (2018) emphasised that key factors for women's success in leadership include formal education, effective communication skills, analytical ability, and the willingness to take calculated risks. Klasen (2019) noted that women working in industries such as manufacturing often lack opportunities to develop these skills, particularly in technical and strategic areas. Bilan *et al.* (2020) argued that bridging this gap requires ongoing investment in professional development. Furthermore, job training programmes often fail to address the specific obstacles women face, which tends to reinforce gender inequalities rather than eliminate them (Zhang, 2020)

Women's experiences in leadership development programmes differ widely. Crenshaw (1989), Debebe and Reinert (2014), and Plantega (2004) highlighted intersectionality to understand how intertwined social identities like gender, race, and class create complex barriers and opportunities in leadership. Cho *et al.* (2013) supported leadership training that incorporates intersectionality, recognising the unique challenges faced by marginalised women, and called for executive programmes to be both inclusive and adaptable to various aspects of identity when implemented.

- *The importance of mentorship and sponsorship*

Mentoring is a crucial element of leadership development that is widely acknowledged today. Zhang (2020) explained that mentorship not only enhances employee retention but also aids in succession planning and prepares future leaders. Klasen (2019) added

that when mentorship aligns with broader organisational change goals, it acts as a driver for transformation at both individual and organisational levels.

In South Africa, Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) highlighted the significant role mentorship plays, particularly in supporting women who were previously disadvantaged to enter the traditionally male-dominated manufacturing sector. However, despite its recognised value, active mentorship programmes supporting women's growth are still underused, even though such mentorship offers benefits for personal development (Boselie & Thunnissen, 2017).

- *Individual identity and cultural influences*

Individual identities and cultural norms significantly shape the routes women take to attain leadership positions. Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) identified gender identity, cultural background, and behavioural traits as crucial factors. Furthermore, Kadiresan *et al.* (2015) contended that socio-religious norms and occupational stereotypes reinforce gender segregation, particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields. Such beliefs obstruct women's involvement in strategic decision-making roles (Nash & Piccinini, 2020; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019).

Stamarski and Hing (2015) emphasised the institutional bias ingrained in HR practices, and which perpetuate masculine leadership standards. Overcoming these biases necessitates a conscious cultural transformation and the adoption of inclusive policies.

- *Internal determinants: age, ethnicity, and personality*

According to Dashper (2020), internal factors such as age, ethnicity, academic success, personality, and characteristics influence women's ability to take on leadership roles. When it comes to trustworthiness, younger women often face challenges, while older women may sometimes be overlooked because of ageist assumptions (Glass & Cook, 2016).

Racial and gender biases mean women from ethnic minority groups encounter a range of difficulties (Moorosi, Fuller & Reilly, 2018). Self-efficacy, which is the belief that one can achieve anything, is especially important, as a low level of self-efficacy is linked to a fear of risk and a reluctance to assume leadership responsibilities (Zamarro & Prados, 2021).

- *Career models: gendered trajectories*

Traditional linear career models often overlook the non-linear paths women frequently take. Eagly and Carli's (2007) 'labyrinth' metaphor effectively illustrates the complex and winding routes women must navigate because of societal expectations and multiple responsibilities. Mainiero and Sullivan's (2005) kaleidoscope career model (KCM) recognises the changing values women place on authenticity, balance, and challenge throughout different life stages. These models highlight the need for leadership programmes that offer flexibility, and that acknowledge women's unconventional career journeys (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021).

- *Dual roles and emotional spillover*

The balance between professional and personal obligations creates emotional spillovers that can either hinder or enhance leadership. Brue (2018) and Liu, Song and Wong (2020) explained how the emotional energy used in one area may affect the performance in another area. Facilitation theory suggests that positive professional experiences can improve home life; however, spillover theory warns about the emotional consequences of overextending oneself (Radó, Nagy & Király, 2016; Adisa, Gbadamosi & Osabutey, 2017). Without adequate support systems, this emotional burden can reduce women's effectiveness and well-being, leading to burnout and turnover.

- *Career sacrifices and family responsibilities*

Family responsibilities remain a major factor in women's career interruptions. Zamarro and Prados (2021) showed that women are much more likely than men to reduce work hours, pause their careers, or quit their jobs entirely due to caregiving duties. These sacrifices limit skills development, slow experience gain, and reduce chances for promotion to senior roles. McKinsey & Company (2020) highlighted that women working in high-pressure industries, like manufacturing, face greater difficulties because of rigid schedules and minimal workplace flexibility. Policies that support work-life balance are crucial for retaining female leadership talent.

The widespread societal expectation for women to assume the primary home and caregiving roles profoundly affects their professional paths, frequently resulting in considerable career sacrifices (Buddhapriya, 2009; Kokkranikal, Calinaud & Baum, 2024). This challenge is exacerbated by conventional gender norms that frequently expect women to prioritise domestic responsibilities above career ambitions, resulting

in an ongoing conflict between professional advancement and familial duties (Adekoya, Adamson, Mordi, Ajonbadi & Adisa, 2024).

This combined demand frequently results in restricted access to managerial positions, notwithstanding progress in women's labour involvement, as family responsibilities significantly impact the professional roles women are able to do (Rowe *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, women often have the undesirable dilemma of choosing between professional progression and initiating a family, a predicament seldom faced by their male colleagues (Pedersen, Schmidt & Saugstrup, 2023).

- *Confidence, self-perception, and leadership identity*

Women frequently internalise cultural messages that weaken their confidence in their leadership roles. A study by Born, Ranehill and Sandberg (2018) found that women in male-dominated environments often doubt their abilities, even when their qualifications are equal to or better than those of their male peers. This internalisation creates a cycle of self-doubt and missed opportunities (Hentschel *et al.*, 2019).

Interventions that boost confidence and help develop leadership identities are crucial for women's progress (Larsson & Alvinus, 2020). Organisational cultures must also work to challenge the stereotypes that associate leadership with traditionally masculine traits (McNamara, 2018).

- *Navigating organisational demands and work norms*

Organisational cultures often enforce strict expectations like long work hours, constant availability, and prioritising work over family responsibilities (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017; Olabiyi, 2023). These standards tend to unfairly disadvantage women who have caregiving duties (Dziuba *et al.*, 2020). According to Elliot (2006), Piterman (2008), and Bay (2019), women who achieve leadership success usually benefit from strong support from spouses or external sources. For some, these inflexible demands pose barriers, leading them to step back from leadership roles even if they are qualified (McLaughlin, 2018). To foster true gender equality, organisations must redefine leadership success and implement flexible work policies.

3.5 HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY

Human capital theory posits that investments in education and skill development yield long-term benefits for individuals and society, forming a fundamental framework for

understanding the interplay between education, skills development, and economic prosperity (Xiao, Zhao & Chan, 2024). This theory, notably advanced by scholars like Schultz and Becker, underscores that such investments enhance productivity and earning potential (Becker, 1964). Specifically, human capital encompasses the knowledge, abilities, and skills embedded within individuals, acquired through various forms of schooling and training, which contribute to their productive capacity (Jio & Kero, 2023).

From a macroeconomic perspective, the accumulation of human capital amplifies labour productivity, stimulates technological innovation, and ultimately fosters sustainable economic growth (Yeshineh & Woldeyes, 2025). This perspective views individuals as economic agents who make rational decisions about investing in their own education and training to maximise their future income and career prospects (Jio & Kero, 2023). Moreover, at the micro level, Becker's initial formulations often focused on individual investment decisions without explicitly modeling broader economic contexts (Hermannsson, Lecca & Swales, 2023).

According to Becker, human capital functions as a means of production, influenced by factors such as education, training, and healthcare access, thereby explaining disparities in graduate pay, and significantly impacting economic growth rates (Jio & Kero, 2023). This perspective is crucial for achieving sustainable development goals, as it enhances productivity and innovation, thereby contributing to poverty reduction (Jio & Kero, 2023; Yeshineh & Woldeyes, 2025).

The human capital theory considers individuals' learning capabilities as valuable resources, similar to other production inputs, and which emphasises education as a critical investment in human potential (Mack, 2024). Therefore, countries that prioritise educational attainment and skills development are more likely to experience robust economic expansion and improved living standards (Asaleye & Strydom, 2022). Conversely, a lack of investment in human capital can impede economic progress by limiting individual capabilities and overall national productivity (Hordofa, 2023).

The genesis of human capital theory can be traced back to the classical economics era, with formalisation occurring much later, highlighting its foundational role in modern economic thought (Mahssouni, Elmi & Tabbal, 2022). The formal introduction of human capital into economic discourse gained significant traction in the 1960s through the

pioneering contributions of Jacob Mincer, Theodore Schultz, and Gary Becker (Thạch, 2020). Their work established human capital as a key variable in explaining economic growth, a factor which traditional macroeconomic models previously struggled to account for (Blair, 2011).

3.5.1 Tokenism theory

The history of tokenism theory has transitioned from initial quantitative observations to a more nuanced comprehension that incorporates intersectional elements, particularly with gender and race (Gustafson, 2008). Most early research focused on numerical disparities, demonstrating that a small proportion of minority individuals in a majority context leads to increased scrutiny and isolation of those tokens (Søraa *et al.*, 2019).

Tokenisation transcends mere numerical representation; it encompasses intricate power relations, the reinforcing of stereotypes, and the perpetuation of established hierarchies, as contemporary research further investigates the qualitative experiences of tokenised individuals (Thorne, 2024). This nuanced perspective acknowledges that social contexts and organisational frameworks together produce unique manifestations of tokenism, extending beyond mere numerical representation, to encompass issues of identity and professional advancement (Schwarzkopf, Voss & Hentschel, 2021).

Christensen and Vendelø (2021) asserted that this relational approach highlights the non-neutrality of the organisational environment, which significantly influences social conditions, and consequently affects the experience of tokenism. This intersectional tokenism is frequently encountered by women of colour in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields, where their gender and racial identities are prominently visible, yet their professional competence is often scrutinised, resulting in persistent pressure to exceed expectations under intense observation (Nash & Moore, 2022).

The persistent demands for exceptional performance, often coupled with an unrecognised burden termed ‘cultural taxation’, compel individuals to embody diversity without adequate institutional support or recognition (Nash & Moore, 2022). Nash and Moore (2022) asserted that this results in a contradiction, where professional

invisibility and hypervisibility coexist, obscuring achievements, while intensifying criticism rooted in gendered and racial biases (Pors, 2021).

Minority groups often assume an inequitable share of mentorship and public engagement responsibilities that are never acknowledged in academic evaluations and detract from their roles as researchers and educators (Nash & Moore, 2020). The interplay of professional marginalisation and hypervisibility exacerbates feelings of isolation among tokenised individuals and contributes to burnout. Dickens, Jones and Hall (2020) asserted that Black women, particularly in fields such as physics, often experience intensified tokenism manifested as gendered racism, compelling them to alter their identities as a coping mechanism in predominantly restrictive environments. Their presence may serve for 'diversity branding' without genuine inclusion or empowerment, exemplified by 'misogynoir', a word denoting the specific prejudice encountered by Black women (Dickens, Brown & Womack, 2020; Kwarteng *et al.*, 2022).

3.5.2 Glass Ceiling Theory

The term 'glass ceiling' refers to the impenetrable, invisible hurdles that prevent highly competent women and minorities from advancing into executive and managerial positions in organisations. It was first used in the United States (US) in the 1970s (Martínez-Fierro & Sancho, 2021). This invisible barrier keeps minorities and women from reaching the top levels of corporate leadership, regardless of their accomplishments or qualifications (Avin *et al.*, 2015; Perales *et al.*, 2021). According to Peña *et al.* (2023), this phenomenon specifically exemplifies the vertical discrimination that women commonly face in corporate settings, which prevents them from achieving positions of authority and responsibility based only on their gender.

Despite their greater participation in the workforce, women continue to be under-represented in executive leadership and governance roles due to this systemic barrier (Noronha & Aithal, 2016a, 2016b). This inequality is especially noticeable in women's restricted access to higher-level professional roles and equivalent pay, highlighting how persistent these imperceptible hurdles are (Martínez-Fierro & Sancho, 2021).

Throughout their careers, women encounter both obvious and hidden obstacles, according to a number of experts. Recent studies have shown that women are under-represented in top corporate leadership positions and earn lower salaries than men

(S. Ali & S. Akter, 2021). Public policies and legal initiatives to promote gender equality and work-life balance are generally ineffective at the executive level, focusing instead on lower organisational levels (Peña *et al.*, 2023).

The glass ceiling notion has expanded to include a variety of related metaphors, such as 'sticky floors', 'labyrinths', and 'glass walls', each of which highlights unique aspects of gendered organisational systems that hinder professional advancement (Huaman-Morillo, García & Quispe, 2024). According to Watanabe and Kwarteng (2024), the labyrinth symbolises the intricate and convoluted routes women must take to advance in their careers, while glass walls symbolise horizontal segregation, limiting women to particular departments or roles that provide few opportunities for executive leadership. According to Fraga *et al.* (2020), the term 'sticky floor' refers to the situation in which women are disproportionately employed in lower-paying, lower-mobility positions with few prospects for promotion, frequently ending up stuck in entry-level or support positions. The continuing vertical segregation in the labour market is reinforced by these widespread hurdles, which together lead to the gender imbalance that is still evident in leadership roles across a variety of industries (Guschke, 2021).

According to Cho, Kim and Park (2024), Bertrand goes into additional detail about these obstacles by classifying them into societal and personal barriers, such as psychological traits, non-market obstacles, and limited educational options, all of which work together to prevent women from advancing in the workforce. In traditionally male-dominated fields like engineering, information technology, and construction, women are disproportionately under-represented in senior management and executive director positions due to these systemic and personal barriers (Bagdogan, 2021). For instance, according to data from the UK Labour Force survey, men are twice as likely as women to be in managerial roles. This inequality is exacerbated in industries such as construction, where the likelihood of a female manager is significantly lower (Pors, 2021). Just 10.9% of FTSE-100 businesses have female executive directors, which is a 'worryingly low' reflection of this widespread vertical segregation (Just & Muhr, 2021). Even with the implementation of programmes like flexible work schedules and mentoring, efforts to promote gender equality have not been very successful in eliminating these vertical segregations (Christensen & Vendelø, 2021).

This enduring imbalance emphasises the necessity of going beyond surface-level remedies to conduct a more thorough analysis of the organisational cultures and underlying systemic variables that sustain these discrepancies (E. Clifford, 2023; (Selman *et al.*, 2021). While some women may succeed through individual tactics, the larger systemic problem of vertical segregation endures, frequently made worse by a lack of solidarity among women and deeply rooted stereotypes that give preference to men in decision-making positions, as evidenced by the persistent glass ceiling challenge (Krause *et al.*, 2022). The prevailing vertical and horizontal segregation in sectors like construction, where women are frequently confined to lower-level administrative positions or under-represented in senior roles, despite possessing equivalent qualifications, exacerbates this systemic barrier (Selman *et al.*, 2021).

3.5.3 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership, a notion first defined by James MacGregor Burns in 1978, refers to a dynamic connection between leaders and followers intended for mutual enhancement (Gasper, 1992). This theoretical paradigm underscores the leader's function in inspiring and encouraging followers to attain elevated levels of morality and commitment, hence, facilitating substantial organisational transformation (Alessa, 2021; Bodilenyane & Chinunda, 2022). Burns differentiated this approach from transactional leadership, suggesting that transformational leaders interact with their teams in a manner that goes beyond mere exchanges of rewards for performance, emphasising collective progress and ethical issues (Rawat, 2015) (Jensen, 2020).

Bernard Bass further elaborated on Burns's core work, clarifying transformational leadership by highlighting its significant influence on followers, fostering loyalty, dedication, and admiration for their leader (Çopani & Kola, 2023). This leadership style is defined by the leader's ability to persuade, educate, and direct subordinates during organisational transformations, fostering a collective vision, and aligning personal goals with overarching organisational aims (Alessa, 2021; Greimel, Steiner & Hauser, 2023). It seeks to cultivate followers into future leaders by aligning their personal visions with those of the organisation (Karauri & Kyongo, 2024).

This framework is characterised by four fundamental dimensions: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration,

which together enhance follower engagement and organisational performance (Baldonado, 2023). Idealised influence entails leaders serving as exemplars, exemplifying elevated moral and ethical norms that garner respect and trust from their subordinates (Navia *et al.*, 2023). This dimension highlights the leader's example conduct, which followers assimilate as a framework for their own acts and convictions (Khirfan & Aziz, 2022; Gupta, 2025).

Such leaders are frequently seen as charismatic, evoking admiration and a propensity among followers to imitate their behaviour and principles (Kungwola, 2023). This internalised effect stems from the leader's self-assurance, authority, and commitment to ethical standards, cultivating profound trust and respect among team members (Peck & Hogue, 2017; Çopani & Kola, 2023). Inspirational motivation enhances this by articulating a persuasive vision of the future, encouraging confidence, and cultivating a robust feeling of purpose and dedication among employees (Nwafor & Chima, 2023). This dimension entails leaders establishing elevated expectations and explicitly communicating organisational objectives, thereby inspiring followers to prioritise group welfare over individual interests (Bastari, Prasetyo & Wulandari, 2020; Vinh, Pham & Tran, 2022).

3.5.4 Barriers Affecting Women Under Organisational Level

Notwithstanding heightened awareness and measures to foster gender equality, women persistently encounter significant barriers in ascending to leadership roles within male-dominated industries at the organisational level. This section discusses the various barriers that have been identified from the literature, such as inflexible work structures and gendered leadership perceptions, and biased organisational policies and practices.

- *Inflexible work structures and gendered leadership perceptions*

The rigidity of organisational frameworks and gendered views of leadership are major barriers that women face in their pursuit of leadership roles. Stichter and Parpart (2019) argued that traditional work schedules, often built around the idea of the male breadwinner, do not accommodate the many responsibilities women have to contend with, such as their roles as both professionals and caregivers. Working mothers encounter disadvantages due to inflexible work structures, often resulting in the

‘mommy track’ effect, where women are forced to accept part-time jobs or leave the workforce entirely because of the mismatch between work demands and family duties.

In addition to this rigidity, the gendered ideals of leadership contribute to the problem. According to Folbre (2019), leadership characteristics have traditionally been based on masculine ideals, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and emotional detachment. As a result, the collaborative or empathetic leadership styles, which are more commonly associated with women, have been devalued through this process. Kaufman and Lindquist (2018) argued that the manufacturing sectors should deconstruct these normative standards and recognise a wider range of leadership expressions to achieve success. Not only would this change legitimise female leadership, but it would also boost leadership diversity, which could greatly improve the sector's resilience and adaptability.

- *Biased organisational policies and practices*

Most manufacturing industry rules, including those related to recruitment, promotions, and compensation, are inherently biased, despite efforts to institutionalise fairness. In their respective studies, Ross, Boyl and Alford (2018) and Nguyen, Sharma and Zeng (2020) demonstrated that recruiting panels and decision-making bodies often mirror existing power structures, subtly reinforcing male dominance in leadership roles. Due to the implicit biases in performance evaluation systems, women may be judged more harshly or held to different standards than men.

In the context of professional growth, training and development activities are often seen as possible solutions. However, Jackson and Fransman (2018) argued that these initiatives usually do not yield the desired results because they are not aligned with the organisation's broader goals, they are often poorly executed, and there is inadequate monitoring of the outcomes. Furthermore, Devillard, Hunt and Yee (2012) noted that many women are hesitant to participate in these activities because they view them as either trivial or insignificant. The stigma associated with ‘women-only’ programmes is another factor that discourages meaningful participation and undermines the purpose they were created for.

- *The role of mentoring and sponsorship*

Mentoring has been recognised for a long time as an essential tool for promoting women in the workplace. It provides women with guidance, exposure, and emotional

support throughout their professional development. According to Efobi, Tanankem, and Asongu (2018), mentorship is beneficial for career advancement and the development of self-confidence in individuals. Additionally, Dashper (2020) makes a distinction between mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring, highlighting the fact that a truly empowering mentorship programme involves all three components.

However, Bonvillain (2020) pointed out that there is a shortage of easily accessible and experienced female mentors, especially in fields dominated by men, such as manufacturing. This creates a cycle of under-representation, where women lack role models and sponsors in senior positions. Zamarro and Prados (2021) suggested that a good way to address this gap is through mentorship between individuals of different genders. However, Verick (2018) warned that women often face increased scrutiny in mentorship agreements, especially with male sponsors, which can limit their willingness to fully participate in the mentoring relationship.

- *Organisational culture and leadership perceptions*

Women's experiences and opportunities for leadership are greatly shaped by an organisation's culture, which is defined by the shared values, beliefs, and behaviours of its members. Piterman (2008) argued that cultures that ignore the real-life experiences of women, including the roles they serve in caring and the societal expectations they meet, effectively marginalise women. In societies that prioritise aggressive competitiveness or long working hours, women who do not conform to these standards are marginalised and feel alienated.

The authors Tsai (2011) and McLaughlin (2018) emphasised that cultural values influence both behaviour and performance expectations. When inclusion is not prioritised in the workplace, women face cultural exclusion, which directly affects how their leadership is viewed across the organisation. Research by Mabokela and Magubane (2022) and Kabeer *et al.* (2021) showed that women in leadership often receive lower performance ratings and less institutional support, which helps sustain gender inequalities and hinders career advancement (Musavengane & Leonard, 2019; Bahn, Giles & Truong, 2020).

- *Gender-inclusive recruitment and selection*

Effective leadership pipeline development relies heavily on the recruitment and selection procedures of the organisation. Biswas (2012), and Rozario, Venkatraman,

and Abbas (2020) advised the broadening of recruitment efforts to attract a diverse range of applicants, with particular emphasis on reaching women in under-represented sectors. However, true inclusion extends beyond outreach activities. Mahbub (2020) and Aleksandra *et al.* (2015) emphasised that transparent, gender-bias-free selection criteria are crucial during the hiring process to promote fairness. Additionally, it is vital to change the attitudes of recruiters to adhere to employment equity regulations, which is a key step in fostering genuinely inclusive hiring practices (Humbert *et al.*, 2019; Latura & Weeks, 2022).

- *Training and development for career advancement*

Women need access to development opportunities to encourage their advancement into leadership roles. Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) called for the creation of structured mentorship and training programmes focused on women, especially in industries like manufacturing where men typically dominate leadership. Campbell (2024) explained that these programmes help women build self-efficacy, enhance their technical skills, and create environments where they can network and succeed.

The demand has catapulted training and development to the forefront, where they have been acknowledged as essential methods for improving staff performance and productivity (Haque, Shaha & Sharmin, 2024). Organisations that implement comprehensive training programmes are more likely to cultivate a culture of lifelong learning, thus enhancing employees' career advancement and overall employability (Sartori *et al.*, 2021). This strategic investment in human capital enhances individual career paths and substantially improves an organisation's overall performance and enduring competitive advantage (Diwedi & Nema, 2023). Moreover, in a progressively competitive industrial environment, companies are compelled to invest in employee training and development to foster a skilled, technologically adept, and engaged workforce capable of optimising production (Vu *et al.*, 2025).

- *Performance management systems*

Performance management systems often suffer from deep-rooted bias, even though they are meant to serve as a gateway to advancement. In their respective works, Aguinis (2009) and Almulaiki (2023) argued that evaluation methods should be transparent and objective, aligning with the goals of strategic diversity. Conversely, Kaur and Singla (2019) highlighted the common disconnect between policy and

practice, noting that implementation often lacks the rigour and consistency needed to ensure fairness.

Amdan, Kassem and Mahrous (2023) maintained that women encounter disadvantages not only from biased judgments but also from diminished motivation. Tang *et al.* (2024) noted that the psychological stress caused by the pressure to continuously prove themselves, exacerbated by the scepticism towards women's leadership, negatively impacts both performance and retention.

- *Succession planning for leadership continuity*

Bugg (2016) and Sanchez-Rodriguez (2021) argued that succession planning is crucial for sustaining a diverse leadership pipeline. Their studies, along with that of Bozer, Levin and Santora (2017), and Chirico, Criaco and Baù (2021), highlighted the importance of identifying and nurturing high-potential women as a vital step toward closing the gender gap. Kendrick and Damasco (2019) and Gerke *et al.* (2023) noted that succession planning often occurs informally, relying on the types of networks and subjective assessments that often overlook women.

Bokhari, Khan and Javed (2020) and Kandade, Nordqvist and Zellweger (2021) endorsed the formalising of succession planning processes. They also advocated for criteria-based assessments and developmental support, specifically for women (Applegate, 2009; Slinger, 2019; Mills, 2024). To disrupt these cycles and foster inclusive growth, careful planning is essential, particularly in male-dominated businesses where leadership transitions tend to reinforce existing hierarchies (Faulkner & Reiter, 2025).

- *Flexible work arrangements and retention*

Flexible work arrangements have been a crucial tactic for organisations seeking to improve employee retention, especially among women, by providing increased autonomy over work times and locations (Guoqiang & Bhaumik, 2024; Brega, Briones, Javornik, León & Yerkes, 2023). This adaptability is especially significant for women who frequently manage intricate intersections of career progression and unequal household and caregiving duties, requiring solutions that facilitate work-life integration (Mahajan & Khandagale, 2025). The intentional adoption of flexible work arrangements is increasingly being acknowledged as a vital element in alleviating

employee turnover intentions, consequently enhancing job happiness, organisational commitment, and diminishing work-family conflict (Jiejing *et al.*, 2024).

A thorough examination of the current literature indicates a range of diverse flexible work arrangements that comprise various options such as flexitime, compressed workweeks, telecommuting, and part-time employment, each with unique effects on employee retention and work-life balance (Angayarkanni *et al.*, 2024). These arrangements jointly enhance employee well-being, job happiness, and productivity, while concurrently allowing organisations to attract and retain talented individuals (Angayarkanni *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, these arrangements are especially valuable for women because of their frequently disproportionate obligations related to childcare and domestic responsibilities, rendering workplace flexibility essential for their professional advancement and total involvement (Escudero-Guirado *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, these arrangements function as an essential mechanism for empowering women in the workplace by granting the requisite autonomy to properly balance professional and personal obligations (Yen *et al.*, 2024).

- *Gender stereotypes and bias in male-dominated sectors*

Women still face significant barriers to leadership due to entrenched gender stereotypes in industries like manufacturing. Ardener *et al.* (2021) noted that assertive women are frequently penalised for challenging gender expectations, often being deemed aggressive or unfeminine. This well-documented phenomenon reinforces the notion that leadership is primarily a male trait, deterring women from seeking leadership roles and undermining their authority (Mariscal *et al.*, 2019).

Hentschel, Heilman and Peus (2019), and Larsson and Alvinus (2020) further described how internalised bias might cause women to doubt their skills, potentially leading to a cycle of underperformance and under-representation. Campbell (2024) emphasised that overcoming these stereotypes requires changing the culture, boosting the visibility of role models, and actively dismantling the traditional ideas of masculine leadership.

- *Structural barriers and organisational systems*

Formal organisational structures often reflect historically male-centric paradigms. The researchers, Nkomo and Ngambi (2009), and Kirai and Mukulu (2012) observed that mechanistic systems, marked by hierarchy, specialisation, and rigidity, tend to exclude

women. These environments typically lack the necessary tools for inclusive networking, mentoring, or leadership development (Taylor-Abdulai *et al.*, 2014).

Shields (2016) contrasted mechanistic and organic structures, contending that the organic structures better encourage inclusivity. Organic structures, defined by flexibility, decentralisation, and collaboration, create a more supportive environment for diverse leadership styles and help diminish structural exclusions, which often impact women more significantly (Kuznets, 1973; Maddison, 1980; Duernecker & Herrendorf, 2022).

- *Pay inequities and institutional culture*

A clear sign of gender inequality is the wage gap between men and women. Studies by Sowjanya *et al.* (2017), Berdahl *et al.* (2018), Seale *et al.* (2021), and Montesano *et al.* (2021) showed that salary differences often stem from institutional cultures that undervalue women's contributions, especially in technical and leadership positions. Additionally, research by Herrendorf, Rogerson and Valentinyi (2014), Ngai and Pissarides (2007), Acemoglu and Guerrieri (2008), and Porzio *et al.* (2022) indicated that gendered social norms assign less importance to work traditionally associated with women, such as caregiving, administrative, or support roles. This ongoing undervaluation remains a significant issue.

Furthermore, Bonvillain (2020) and Bilan *et al.* (2020) supported the adoption of targeted gender equity policies, pay transparency initiatives, and cultural interventions to promote essential systemic change. In male-dominated industries, tackling pay inequality is crucial not just for fairness but also as a strategic approach to attract and retain female talent (O'Neil *et al.*, 2018).

3.6 INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

Intersectionality, a theoretical framework developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, originated from Black feminist theory to clarify the complex oppressions faced by Black women (Bauer *et al.*, 2021; Pinem, 2023). This theory asserts that diverse social identities, including race, gender, class and sexuality, do not function in isolation but cross and interact to influence individual experiences of privilege and oppression (Thomas *et al.*, 2021). It specifically contests traditional notions of discrimination by emphasising that prevailing interpretations frequently favour the

experiences of more privileged groups, thus neglecting the distinct disadvantages encountered by individuals at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities (Holman *et al.*, 2021).

The interrelation of social categories, including gender, race, and class, constitutes an individual's 'social location', which directly influences their lived experiences and illustrates intricate dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression at structural levels (Keller *et al.*, 2023). This intersectionality theoretical framework transcends singular assessments of inequality, which frequently isolate characteristics such as race or gender, to elucidate how their intersection produces unique and often exacerbated forms of marginalisation and privilege (Pinem, 2023; Ivanov, 2024).

The intersectionality framework offers a comprehensive tool for analysing how interconnected power structures generate distinct forms of social inequality that frequently remain obscured when viewed through isolated identity perspectives (Yuval-Davis, 2015). Moreover, intersectionality transcends the simple identification of overlapping categories to examine the intricate interactions among these categories across many levels of social organisation, ranging from personal experiences to institutional frameworks (Winker & Degele, 2011). It offers a paradigm for comprehending how organisations, institutions, and individuals sustain inequality through complex, interconnected practices of oppression (Luiz & Terziev, 2022).

Crenshaw's initial conceptualisation clearly illustrated how legal frameworks frequently neglect the unique prejudice encountered by individuals experiencing intersecting forms of marginalisation, therefore sustaining systemic disparities (Woods *et al.*, 2021).

This approach demands moving away from assessments that isolate identity variables, such as age, colour, ethnicity, or gender, and instead acknowledges their interwoven multiplicity in shaping unique lived experiences (Thorne, 2024). This theoretical innovation facilitates a more nuanced comprehension of multi-dimensional identity constructs, transcending basic, unidimensional categorisation analyses (Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018). It underscores that these social statuses are interrelated and interact multiplicatively, rather than additively, to shape experiences and outcomes (Tobin *et al.*, 2023).

3.6.1 Feminist Theory

Faissner, Krüger and Müller (2022) maintained that feminist theory challenges the traditional conceptions of gender, power, and social institutions by embracing a wide spectrum of viewpoints. It provides important intersectional perspectives to examine the world rather than focusing only on women (Ferguson, 2017).

Although this theoretical framework frequently evolves independently of critical theory, it is similar in that it criticises social and economic injustices and promotes systemic change (Martin, 2003). This interest in socio-economic inequality is frequently based on the knowledge that oppression and power relations are interdependent systems that uphold injustice (Ratliff, 2024). Bell (2006), for example, highlighted the interdependence of these causes, resulting in a complex network of societal injustices that transcends discrete categories (Ratliff, 2024). In fact, the idea of intersectionality is central to feminist theory, especially Black feminist thought. It is a critical analytical tool that helps us understand how different identities, such as gender, race, and class, interact and impact individual experiences and power dynamics (Mitkus & Jablonskyte, 2025; Bendifallah *et al.*, 2023).

According to this paradigm, social categories are linked together and create a power structure that is dependent on one another. This results in unique oppressive situations that are frequently missed by a single analytical approach (Bengtzen & Scott, 2023; Ratliff, 2024).

The word 'feminism' was made popular in the 1980s by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who emphasises how some women are in particularly vulnerable situations due to qualitatively diverse intersecting inequalities based on power, gender, racism, class, nationality, and age (Haynes, 2022). Because people can suffer from several overlapping types of disadvantage that are not taken into consideration by single-axis studies, this method calls for a more thorough knowledge of discrimination (Bendifallah *et al.*, 2023).

An intersectional paradigm offers important analytical advantages, such as the realisation of simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity (Carastathis, 2014). According to Søråa *et al.* (2019) and Broms *et al.* (2017), this approach goes beyond just identifying numerous identities to examine how these identities combine to create distinct experiences of privilege and oppression. This theoretical framework offers a

strong approach for analysing the ways in which different social categories like class, gender, sexual orientation, and race combine to influence both institutional arrangements and people's lived lives (Pinem, 2023).

3.6.2 Barriers Affecting Women Under Social Level

Societal barriers preventing women's advancement into leadership are deeply rooted in lasting cultural norms, traditional gender roles, and the ingrained stereotypes that go beyond organisational boundaries and are visible in broader socio-political settings (World Bank, 2019, 2020; Hyland *et al.*, 2020).

In many parts of the Global South, including India and much of Africa, women frequently face cultural expectations that confine them to caregiving and domestic responsibilities (Gupta *et al.*, 2008). According to Lee (2022), these roles, often supported by societal norms and deeply entrenched traditions, reinforce the belief that women are less suitable for leadership, a factor that hinders their career growth. As a result, women in professional settings often experience biased performance evaluations and carry an unequal workload to prove their competence, requiring significantly more effort than men to gain similar recognition (International Labour Organisation, 2019).

Furthermore, Hsieh *et al.* (2019) discussed social beliefs about women having limited geographic mobility, which is often linked to familial and caregiving duties. These beliefs further restrict their suitability for high-stakes leadership roles that require travel or relocation (Ngo *et al.*, 2021). These limitations are not just personal issues; they reflect structural societal frameworks that hinder women's career advancement from the start (Gottlieb *et al.*, 2023). Victoria, Mendez and Roberts (2019) observed that although these barriers are beyond the direct control of individual organisations, they profoundly influence workplace dynamics and career outcomes, shaping both the perceptions and realities related to women's leadership potential.

Various scholars, such as Bruckmüller and Braun (2020), Murray (2014), and Jun, Kim and Choi (2022), have emphasised that understanding the ongoing under-representation of women in leadership, especially in male-dominated fields like manufacturing, requires a comprehensive, context-aware approach that goes beyond standard Eurocentric paradigms. Furthermore, Nkomo and Ngambi (2009), as well as Nienaber and Moraka (2018a), highlighted that the experiences of women leaders in

Africa cannot be fully grasped without considering the complex interaction of historical, political, economic, and cultural factors. Colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, and class-based exclusions intersect with gender norms, shaping the socio-political environment that African women navigate in their leadership journeys.

Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) called for a critical redefinition of leadership studies, by incorporating African feminist and postcolonial perspectives. They emphasised the importance of shifting analytical approaches to better reflect Africa's unique historical and socio-political contexts (Nienaber & Moraka, 2018a). Several authors (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Lawless & Fox, 2018; Brysbaert, 2019; Nkomo, 2021a) noted that women leaders still operate within environments influenced by racialised patriarchy and the ongoing structural inequalities rooted in colonial history. According to the World Economic Forum (2022), Cahn (2020), Hubbard (2021), Hyken (2019), and Catalyst (2021), the interconnected systems of race, gender, class, and history continue to limit access to leadership roles and shape societal power dynamics.

- *Socio-cultural constraints and the need for reform*

Integrating meso-level thinking into talent management solutions addresses these deeply rooted societal restrictions (Nienaber & Moraka, 2018b). This involves recognising that leadership pipelines are shaped not only by organisational structures but also by broader social attitudes and value systems (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). Organisational interventions may have limited effectiveness if socio-cultural norms are overlooked (Seale *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, talent management must develop into a socially aware practice that questions existing assumptions and reshapes public discourse around leadership (Gallardo *et al.*, 2015).

- *Societal norms and gender stereotypes*

A significant obstacle to women's leadership in society is the deeply rooted nature of gender stereotypes (Hentschel *et al.*, 2019). From early life, societal expectations shape individuals into gender roles that emphasise attributes such as strength, decisiveness, and leadership in boys, while promoting passivity, nurturance, and subservience in girls (Born *et al.*, 2018). Larsson and Alvinus's (2020) notion of hegemonic masculinity offers a valuable theoretical framework for understanding this issue. Galinsky *et al.* (2013) and Hall *et al.* (2019) explained that hegemonic

masculinity establishes a dominant masculine identity that positions men as leaders and decision-makers, thereby subordinating women.

These ideals influence the workplace through implicit bias and prejudiced recruitment practices. Berger *et al.* (1974) found that leadership is often seen as inherently masculine, leading to a 'think-leader, think-male' bias. Correll and Ridgeway (2008) argued that assessors subconsciously associate assertiveness and competence with men, while linking empathy or passivity with women. As a result, women must work harder to prove their leadership abilities. They are often scrutinised more harshly for the same behaviours men display, a phenomenon known as the double bind (Kabeer, Razavi & Van-der-Meulen, 2021).

Stereotypes influence both recruiting and promotion decisions, as well as the development of organisational culture (Erthal & Marques, 2018; Bahn *et al.*, 2020). In industries where strength, decisiveness, and technical expertise are valued, women often face difficulties in meeting the required masculine standards without repercussions for deviating from gender norms (Gyunn & Fraser, 2023). Dirisu *et al.* (2018) argued that cultural differences across countries shape the division of labour within various professions.

- *Domestic responsibilities and career impact*

Women's household responsibilities significantly hinder their advancement into leadership roles, especially in settings with weak social support systems and limited job flexibility (Paudel, 2023). Taylor-Abdulai *et al.* (2014) observed that women across Africa disproportionately carry unpaid domestic and caregiving duties, which restricts their time and energy for career growth or leadership development. Campbell *et al.* (2020) clarified that this unpaid labour is both underestimated and normalised in society, reinforcing the idea that a woman's primary role is domestic work.

Even when women successfully balance professional and domestic responsibilities, their contributions are often ignored (Bruder & Baar, 2024). Cardon and Arwine (2023) demonstrated that women in leadership roles are consistently held to higher performance standards than their male counterparts. Suci *et al.* (2022) found that women's achievements are often minimised, while men are more frequently praised for similar successes. Alder *et al.* (2022) and Fan *et al.* (2021) explained the existence

of a phenomenon called ‘the invisible labour of leadership’, in which women lead and contribute significantly, yet are rarely recognised or rewarded.

Many evaluators hold implicit biases, often believing that men are inherently more competent or possess superior leadership qualities (Alder *et al.*, 2022; Herrendorf *et al.*, 2014; Comin *et al.*, 2021). These biases remain even when women perform at the same level, or better than men. Booyesen and Nkomo (2014) and Simmons and Yawson (2022) pointed out that women are frequently excluded from key opportunities such as leadership development, mentorship programmes, and strategic assignments crucial for career growth.

Several studies (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015; Hills, 2015; Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008; Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011) have indicated that because women face more obstacles in the workplace, they tend to need mentorship more than their male counterparts.

3.7 TALENT MANAGEMENT WITHIN THE MESO-LEVEL FRAMEWORK

A comprehensive approach to personnel management is essential to tackle these complex challenges. Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) proposed a framework at the meso-level that integrates recruiting, development, and retention strategies through the lens of gender bias. The implementation of this strategy requires systemic change across all levels of the organisation.

It has been noted that there is a lack of unified research and practice in the African context regarding how recruiting criteria and organisational culture affect women's chances of holding leadership positions (Grosvold, 2009; Storvik, 2015; Terjesen *et al.*, 2015). Integrated solutions that align talent management with equity goals are needed to close this gap. Progress can be tracked using gender-disaggregated data and outcome-based metrics (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2020; Kravariti *et al.*, 2021).

3.7.1 Definition of talent management

Although ‘talent management’ is often utilised in modern organisational discussions, its exact definition continues to be a topic of significant scholarly contention and conceptual uncertainty (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). The absence of a globally

recognised definition frequently arises from the diverse interpretations of the term 'talent', which may comprise a broad perspective that includes all personnel or a narrow concentration on a select few that are considered essential to organisational performance (Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Hjordrup, 2015).

Academics widely concur that context profoundly affects the precise definition of skill, making it both relative and subjective (Hjordrup, 2015). This contextual dependency frequently results in definitions being significantly shaped by the nature of the work performed and the particular industry or professional domains (Zhang & Nesbit, 2018; Tansley, 2011). Moreover, although some view talent management as simply a rebranding of conventional human resource management, others emphasise its concentrated attention on strategically significant jobs and high-potential individuals inside an organisation (Hajam & John, 2023). Effective talent management surpasses traditional HR tasks by deliberately connecting employee development with the organisation's ultimate mission and vision, thereby serving as a vital tool for long-term profitability and sustainability (Marin & Marin, 2024).

3.7.2 Talent management within the context of women in management and leadership

The existing literature on talent management (TM) within the manufacturing industry shows a lack of comprehensive research covering recruitment, development, and retention practices, especially regarding the different experiences of men and women related to their identities. This gap stems from the limited research on the recruitment of directors to executive positions (Grosvold, 2009; Storvik, 2015; Terjesen *et al.*, 2009, 2015). There are only a few studies on the criteria for selecting executive management, particularly concerning the factors that help recruit women into leadership roles (Gill, 2014; Lewis *et al.*, 2017; Ronen, 2018). Additionally, there is a lack of understanding about women's talent development for executive positions and the factors that influence their long-term retention. Much of the current research, mainly conducted outside of Africa, has focused on identifying barriers to recruiting women (Glass & Cook, 2016).

A literature review shows that discussions mainly concentrate on the barriers blocking women's progress to executive roles. These obstacles are typically classified into organisational, societal, and individual categories (Eyring & Stead, 1998; Nath, 2000;

Budhwar & Sparrow, 2002; Chadha, 2002; Kulkarni, 2002; Fitzsimmons, 2012). The primary theoretical frameworks in research on women in executive positions mainly align with feminist approaches, offering insights into the ongoing under-representation of women in such roles (Lewis *et al.*, 2017; Lewis *et al.*, 2022).

3.8 EVOLUTION OF FEMINISM FROM APARTHEID LEGISLATION TO B-BBEE

The shift from exclusionary apartheid labour laws to contemporary regulatory frameworks like the Employment Equity Act and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment has sought to dismantle structural barriers for women (Chinyamurindi, 2016; Matotoka & Odeku, 2021a, 2021b). Despite these legislative interventions, persistent disparities in top management and senior leadership roles underscore the incomplete integration of feminist objectives within the manufacturing industry's operational hierarchies (Barkhuizen *et al.*, 2022; Mathetha & Dhanpat, 2025). While these policies mandate representational quotas, evidence suggests they often result in coercive compliance rather than meaningful transformation of career trajectories for women (Ketchiwou, 2025). Furthermore, historical gender biases continue to cast women as possessing limited autonomy, thereby hindering their advancement into technical and leadership roles within the sector (Ketchiwou *et al.*, 2022). Such persistent horizontal and vertical segregation suggests that the institutionalization of gender equity remains largely performative, failing to adequately address the underlying socioeconomic gaps that prevent women from ascending beyond administrative or entry-level positions (Musetsho *et al.*, 2021; Sinden, 2017).

This resistance is frequently rooted in "gendered substructures"—invisible, entrenched organisational processes that reproduce male-centric assumptions regarding competency and leadership (Moalusi & Jones, 2019). Consequently, these ingrained cultural norms ensure that even when diversity targets are met, women frequently encounter systemic dehumanisation that precludes their inclusion in strategic decision-making processes (Deist, 2024; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). Consequently, these policies have inadvertently fostered an environment where formal legislative compliance masks the reality that corporate culture and rigid social structures continue to impede women's career progression (Mathur-Helm, 2005; Persson & Svensson, 2020). Moreover, this disconnect is exacerbated by persistent

pay gaps and the psychological burden of navigating entrenched stereotypes, which often render traditional affirmative action strategies ineffective in achieving substantive equality (Hofmeyr, 2012). Beyond these structural impediments, the reliance on superficial representational metrics often fails to catalyse the necessary institutional culture shifts, leading to what some scholars characterise as symbolic inclusion rather than genuine empowerment (Baker *et al.*, 2025). In this context, the manufacturing sector faces a distinct crisis where the enforcement of labour laws remains disjointed from the day-to-day realities of industrial labour, further entrenching patriarchal norms (Kipkebut *et al.*, 2025; Kundu, 2025). This tension is further compounded when legislation is instrumentalised to perpetuate existing power dynamics, as organizations may subvert equality mandates to maintain the status quo under the guise of technical meritocracy (Bairoh, 2023; Machado *et al.*, 2025). This reliance on meritocratic rhetoric frequently reinforces the "ideal worker" norm, which valorises prolonged physical presence and aligns leadership capacity with historically masculine traits (Chakraborty, 2022). Furthermore, these organizational frameworks frequently overlook the intersectional nature of inequality, neglecting how socioeconomic status and ethnicity compound the obstacles faced by women navigating these historically male-dominated industrial environments (Adeniyi *et al.*, 2024).

The following review synthesises the theoretical perspectives on gendered organisations to contextualise how entrenched societal norms translate into covert discriminatory practices within the manufacturing workplace (Martin & Barnard, 2013; Shivhare & Gurunathan, 2024). By drawing on institutional theory, this examination highlights how organizational decoupling allows firms to adopt mandatory diversity frameworks while simultaneously perpetuating traditional, gendered hierarchies that constrain substantive advancement (Gibert & Fedorets, 2024). This conceptualization positions gendered organizations as constellations of metaphors embedded in corporate culture, where informal practices and identity conflicts continue to marginalise women regardless of formal equality mandates (Huaman-Morillo *et al.*, 2024), (Mirjam, 2025). Moreover, the persistent reliance on gender role incongruity theory clarifies how leadership in manufacturing remains tethered to masculine traits, framing women as inherently misaligned with technical authority (Rajha & Ruiters, 2025; Ramseook-Munhurrin *et al.*, 2023). Such internalised perceptions create a hostile environment where gendered stereotypes about leadership styles act as

persistent barriers to career progression, regardless of a firm's formal policy alignment (Jaime *et al.*, 2023). This phenomenon is further reinforced by the "liability of newness," where organizations frequently revert to archaic informal norms under conditions of uncertainty, thereby undermining the transformative potential of legislative reforms (Mackay, 2014).

3.9 FEMINIST THEORY APPLIED TO THE CURRENT STUDY

The theoretical foundation of the present study as discussed in Section 1.6 is African feminism which stresses the importance of examining the conditions of women and men within the African contexts. In this study, the theoretical underpinning provides the underlying theoretical assumptions and explanations, while the theoretical framework operationalises these theories into a coherent structure for investigating the barriers and enablers influencing women's advancement to executive management positions. The framework guided the formulation of the research aims, interview questions, data analysis and interpretation of findings, facilitating a theoretical and empirical alignment. (Goldman, 2016) The major challenge in gender studies is the assumption that all the former colonies have the same historical experiences and results of the European influence. There are a lot of cultural and historical differences between the countries (Banerjee, 1999; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Goldman, 2016).

Mbodji (2023) advocated for a careful analysis of women and gender in Africa, warning against the widespread use of Eurocentric frameworks that standardise women's identities worldwide, as previously mentioned. Despite women's marginalisation in leadership roles globally, there are differences in their self-constructed identities and perceptions of themselves and their environments, specifically between non-colonial and post-colonial settings, resulting in diverse experiences (Sadiki, 2023). Since feminism explores women's philosophical and social identities (Hekman, 2015), researchers should avoid generalising the experiences of women and men across post-colonial African and non-African countries, as women's status is influenced by cultural factors (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009) and specific local oppressions.

Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) promoted feminist research that aims to develop theory rooted in African perspectives, emphasising that current literature mainly depends on Western frameworks and dialogues, with insufficient integration of African paradigms

and gender-identity analysis. Therefore, research on female leadership in Africa must consider the continent's distinct socio-historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts (Jackson, 2004; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Nienaber & Moraka, 2018c).

Feminist scholars of colour and white feminist academics recognise that much feminist research has historically centred on white, middle-class women, often neglecting the complexities of gender as it intersects with class, race/ethnicity, and other aspects of diversity (Bell, 1981; Acker, 2006; Booysen & Nkomo, 2006; Dlamini, 2016). While further progress is necessary, the significance of intersectional analysis has gained increasing recognition (Collins, 1995; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Weber, 2001; Fenstermaker & West, 2002; Booysen & Nkomo, 2009; Dlamini, 2013, 2016). However, understanding how these disparities intersect with systems of inequality remains difficult (Weber, 2001; Acker, 2006).

African feminism inherently includes intersectionality in its analysis. The strength of the current research lies in its inclusion of the diverse perspectives of women and men from various racial backgrounds within the unique post-colonial South African context (Soklaridis *et al.*, 2022). Although the sample sizes within each subgroup are somewhat limited, the results should be meaningful for others in similar situations, even if they are not universally applicable (Lewis, Benschop & Simpson, 2017; Elliott & Stead, 2018).

3.10 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework provides a multi-level explanation of women's leadership advancement within South Africa's manufacturing sector through an intersectional African feminism lens. The framework integrates individual, organisational, and societal dimensions to explain the barriers and facilitators influencing women's progression into leadership positions (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Moraka, 2024). At the individual level, the framework applies social role theory to explain how gender stereotypes, self-perceptions, and societal expectations shape women's leadership experiences and career outcomes (Curini *et al.*, 2023; Lesch *et al.*, 2023). At the organisational level, human capital theory explains how organisational investment in skills development, mentoring, sponsorship, training, and career opportunities enhances women's leadership progression (Xiao, Zhao & Chan, 2024). This level

focuses on talent management practices, including recruitment, development, and retention strategies designed to promote equitable access to leadership opportunities. At the societal level, intersectionality theory explains how overlapping identities such as gender, race, class, and culture create unique forms of disadvantage for women (Rogers, Evans & Hayes, 2019).

These three theoretical perspectives collectively inform talent management practices centred on recruitment, development and retention (Nienaber & Moraka, 2018b; Moraka, 2024). The aim is to maintain a skilled and motivated workforce to meet organisational goals, which also plays a vital role in supporting women's advancement in manufacturing (Keller & Meaney, 2017). Traditional talent management approaches often assume neutrality; however, evidence shows that organisational structures are influenced by historical and cultural biases, frequently favouring masculine leadership and performance standards (Ely et al., 2011; Morley, 2013).

Effective implementation of these practices leads to structural disruption by reforming organisational policies and systems, behavioural change by strengthening women's leadership capabilities, and normative disruption by challenging traditional gender stereotypes. Ultimately, the framework aims to achieve transformative impact through greater gender equity, organisational growth and sustainable prosperity. The entire framework is grounded in an Intersectional African Feminist lens, ensuring that the proposed talent management practices are contextually relevant to the lived experiences of women in South Africa's manufacturing sector.

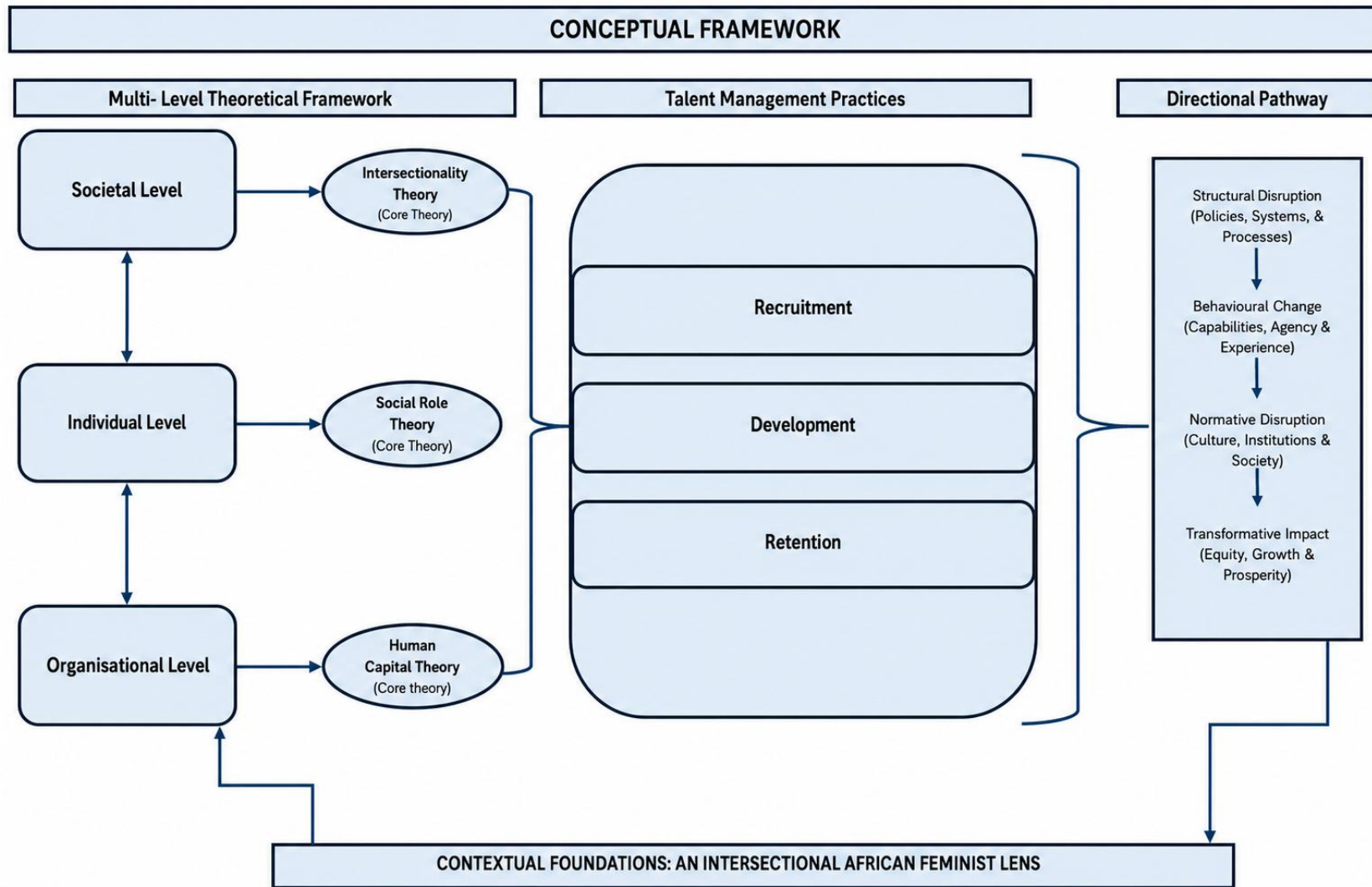


Figure 3.3: Conceptual framework

Source: Researcher's own compilation

3.11 STUDIES ON WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP GLOBALLY AND IN SOUTH AFRICA

The presence of women in leadership roles within male-dominated industries has attracted significant global attention due to ongoing gender inequalities and the under-representation of women in top positions (Humbert, Kelan & Van den Brink, 2019; Latura & Weeks, 2022).

Studies on women in leadership globally in male-dominated industries, as shown in Table 2.1, indicate that various sectors, including manufacturing, engineering, mining, and technology, consistently display gendered leadership structures, where cultural and organisational barriers hinder women's professional advancement (Catalyst, 2023; Plachy & Smunt, 2022).

The literature on gender in leadership has emerged as a counter to the prevailing masculinist paradigm that has historically influenced leadership studies, primarily focusing on evidence that women can also be good leaders (Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo & Michel, 2016). Although this advocates for women, it fails to undermine the masculine paradigms as the standard for leadership success (Dwivedi, Misra & Singh, 2018).

Despite post-apartheid legislative efforts to promote gender and racial equality in South Africa, women, especially Black women, continue to be significantly under-represented in senior leadership roles across key sectors, including JSE-listed companies and STEM fields (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010; Boshoff, 2020).

Research shows that although women make up a large part of the workforce, their presence in executive and board positions remains disproportionately low, with Black women facing additional marginalisation due to intersecting gender and racial factors (Patterson, Mavin & Turner, 2014; Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018; Kimbu, De Jong, Adeola & Hottola, 2021; CEE, 2023). Booyesen and Nkomo (2010) argued that structural and cultural biases in South African organisations sustain discriminatory practices, despite the official equity policies. For example, progress has been slow in JSE-listed companies, and while there has been a slight rise in the number of women on boards, Black women are still rarely recruited into executive roles (Businesswomen's Association of South Africa [BWASA], 2021).

Boshoff (2020) explained that these gaps are particularly evident in STEM disciplines, where patriarchal attitudes, historical educational disadvantages, and restricted mentorship opportunities significantly hinder women's professional progress. Furthermore, Msimanga and Goba (2016) indicated that tokenism and insufficient substantive inclusion often hinder the retention and advancement of women within leadership pipelines. Although Booysen's (2021) study found that legislation, such as the Employment Equity Act and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), has established a foundation for transformation, the findings showed that substantial change will be required to effect a profound alteration in organisational culture, accompanied by leadership accountability, and ongoing investment in mentorship and sponsorship initiatives.

The South African situation exemplifies the need to address historical, societal, and institutional impediments simultaneously to achieve genuine progress in gender and racial representation within leadership roles (Bosch *et. al.*, 2020; Msweli & Kule, 2023).

Table 3.1: Studies on women globally in male-dominated industries

Author(s) and Year	Title/Focus	Context	Methodology	Key findings	Gaps/ Limitations	Relevance to the study
Catalyst (2023)	Women in leadership: Why it matters	Global industries, focus on male-dominated sectors.	Data review and trend analysis.	Persistent under-representation of women leaders due to structural barriers and bias.	Focuses more on high-level trends than sector-specific analysis.	Highlights global patterns of gender disparity in leadership roles.
Eagly & Carli (2007)	Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders	Global perspective across industries.	Theoretical and empirical review.	Women face unique leadership barriers such as stereotypes and the 'labyrinth' effect.	Does not focus solely on male-dominated industries.	Provides foundational theory explaining systemic gender biases in leadership.
Eagly & Heilman (2016)	Gender and leadership: Introduction to the special issue	Leadership studies across multiple sectors.	Literature review and meta-analysis.	Women often adopt transformational leadership styles to counter bias and gain acceptance.	Focus is broad, not sector-specific.	Explains leadership styles used by women to succeed in male-dominated contexts.
Powell & Sang (2015)	Everyday experiences of sexism in male-dominated professions	Engineering and construction industries.	Qualitative study (interviews, narrative analysis).	Gender norms and organisational cultures significantly hinder women's progression.	Limited to engineering and construction in the UK.	Demonstrates the impact of sexism and culture on women's leadership roles.
ILO (2021)	Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world	International, cross-sector analysis.	Policy analysis and global workforce data.	Countries with gender equality policies have better female leadership representation.	Focus on policy rather than individual experience.	Offers policy-based solutions to leadership inequality globally.
McKinsey & Company (2020)	Women in the workplace 2020	Global industries, including manufacturing.	Quantitative research, surveys, and data trends.	Women hold less than 25% of leadership roles in industrial and technical sectors worldwide.	Focused on corporate data, limited qualitative insights.	Provides up-to-date statistics on women in leadership positions globally.

Author(s) and Year	Title/Focus	Context	Methodology	Key findings	Gaps/ Limitations	Relevance to the study
Bosch, Van der Linde & Barit (2020)	Gender and leadership: Women in corporate South Africa	Corporate and manufacturing sectors.	Mixed-method research (interviews, reports).	Women face systemic barriers, including stereotypes, lack of sponsorship, and gender pay gaps.	Focuses mainly on corporate boards, less on operational industries.	Highlights structural and cultural barriers affecting women leaders.
Msweli & Kule (2023)	Transformational leadership and gendered attributes in manufacturing	South African manufacturing industry.	Qualitative case study.	Transformational leadership is key for women to navigate male-dominated workplaces.	Limited sample within manufacturing plants.	Provides insight into leadership styles adopted by women in manufacturing.
Booyesen (2007)	Barriers to employment equity implementation and women's advancement	South African industries.	Qualitative interviews and organisational surveys.	Cultural stereotypes and patriarchal structures impede women's progression into leadership roles.	Data predates recent gender equity policy changes.	Provides foundational insights into gender equity challenges in South Africa.
April, Dreyer & Blass (2007)	Gender impediments to the South African boardroom	Corporate leadership in South Africa.	Quantitative analysis of board representation.	Few women occupy top leadership roles due to entrenched patriarchal corporate cultures.	Focuses mainly on boards, not middle or operational leadership.	Demonstrates glass ceiling effects in corporate South Africa.
Mpinganjira (2015)	Gender and leadership in South Africa: Leadership effectiveness	Private and public sectors.	Survey-based quantitative research.	Women leaders are perceived as equally effective as men but face greater scrutiny.	Does not delve into sector-specific issues (e.g., manufacturing).	Highlights perception vs. reality in leadership effectiveness.
Maseko & Van der Westhuizen (2020)	Women in leadership: Challenges in South African mining	Mining industry.	Qualitative interviews.	Gender bias, safety concerns, and work-life conflict hinder women's leadership advancement.	Focused solely on mining.	Illustrates specific challenges in male-dominated, heavy industries.

Author(s) and Year	Title/Focus	Context	Methodology	Key findings	Gaps/ Limitations	Relevance to the study
Nkomo & Booysen (2011)	Gender role stereotypes and requisite management characteristics	SA corporate sector.	Quantitative survey (Schein Index, 592 managers).	Results confirm the think manager, think male hypothesis for Black and white men but not for Black and white women. Black and white men are less likely to attribute successful managerial characteristics to women.	Focused on finance only; cross-sectional; dated (2010).	Frames intersectional stereotypes in management – useful for meso-level modelling.
Nkomo & Ngambi (2009)	Women in business leadership in South Africa	SA business leadership.	Feminist/ intersectional analysis.	Illustrates the racial gender intersection in business leadership.	Grey literature, not peer-reviewed	Offers foundational framework your meso-level framework draws upon.
Mans-Kemp & Viviers (2015)	Investigating board diversity in South Africa	Business context.	Mixed methods.	The findings presented describe the gender and race of directors in the sample, the board diversity score and the board diversity across industries.	The findings of this study thus do not provide a strong business case for board diversity in South Africa.	Relevant to gender/stereotype congruity in public sectors.
Viviers, Mans-Kemp & Fawcett (2017)	Mechanisms to promote board gender diversity in South Africa	Business context.	Qualitative (Semi-structured interviews).	The study shows significant support for gender-diverse boards, driven by ethical, performance, and governance factors.	The rationale for having gender diverse boards, the academic debate now centres on mechanisms which could address gender imbalances at board level.	Builds on earlier Mans-Kemp & Viviers work; may refine stereotypes in leadership.

Author(s) and Year	Title/Focus	Context	Methodology	Key findings	Gaps/ Limitations	Relevance to the study
Toerien, Breedts & De Jager (2023)	Does board gender diversity improve environmental, social and governance disclosure? Evidence from South Africa	SA Corporate.	Mixed methods.	Positive correlation is found between female board representation and both aggregate ESG and S-disclosure.	These findings, especially the stronger finding for aggregate ESG disclosure, are in line with those of Ardito <i>et al.</i> (2020), who found that female board representation is beneficial for CSR overall, but not necessarily for all its components.	Applies updated empirical insights in SA post-2020 context.
Mvita & Du Toit (2024)	Gender diversity in corporate boards of companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange: a quantile regression approach	SA organisational / leadership.	Quantitative survey.	The study reveals that women on the board impact firm return on assets and enterprise value, varying across performance distribution. This contrasts fixed effect findings but aligns with two-stage least squares.	The empirical findings suggest that companies with no women directors on the board are generally more likely to experience a decrease in performance and enterprise value relative to companies with women directors on the board.	Very current — potentially maps new gender-role constructs.
Willows & Van der Linde (2016)	Women representation on boards: a South African perspective	South African workplace.	Quantitative survey.	Women representation appears to influence company performance positively when using accounting-based measures of performance (such as return on assets and return on equity), but negatively when using market-based measures.	These findings are of relevance to the boards of directors adhering to corporate governance requirements by challenging the role of women on the board of directors, as well as that of investors and those in practice, to understand the current status of women representation.	Provides mid-2010s perspective relevant to shifts since apartheid.

Author(s) and Year	Title/Focus	Context	Methodology	Key findings	Gaps/ Limitations	Relevance to the study
Jansen van Rensburg & Moraka (2015)	Transformation in the South African mining industry – looking beyond the employment equity scorecard.	SA leadership / gender.	Qualitative research methodology.	Most notable initiatives included staff recruitment efforts to appoint HDSAs, staff development initiatives, as well as community development.	Focused on mining sector.	Complements Nkomo & others with additional voice/context.
Bosch, Van der Linde & Barit (2020)	Women on South African boards - facts, fiction and forward thinking.	SA management or HR practice.	Qualitative research.	In 2008, 14.3% of JSE-company directors were women.	The study focuses on board-level involvement while overlooking the sectoral differences and intersectional barriers that hinder women's progression to senior leadership roles.	Introduces frameworks or models possibly useful for linking to role congruity.
Msweli & Kule (2023)	Voices of women in boards count, effective participation counts more: A board gender diversity theoretical framework.	SA management / gender theory.	Qualitative research.	The principal component analysis was used to identify the structure of the relationship among the 16 items that emerged from the literature and the interviews.	First, the sample size is quite small, and as such, the dimensionality of the tool needs to be interpreted with caution. The second limitation is that data was narrowly focused on JSE-listed companies in three industries.	Most recent model/framework potentially bridging role congruity and diversity.
CEE (historic trend reference) (2010–2023)	Longitudinal Employment Equity Trends.	National management representation over time.	Quantitative method (Time-series descriptive analysis).	Stagnant acceleration rate; plateauing female advancement at senior levels despite policies.	Descriptive; no causal attribution; industrial disaggregation coarse.	Justifies urgency for targeted sectoral (manufacturing) strategies beyond compliance.
BWASA (2021)	[BWASA Women in Leadership Census / Report].	JSE-listed & large SA companies (board &	Secondary analysis of company disclosures;	Slow, uneven progress appointing women—especially Black women—to boards and	Focus on listed entities; possible survivorship and disclosure bias; limited causal inference.	Highlights occupational/role segregation reinforcing

Author(s) and Year	Title/Focus	Context	Methodology	Key findings	Gaps/ Limitations	Relevance to the study
		executive positions).	descriptive benchmarking.	C-suite; clustering in support (HR/legal) rather than core operations.		incongruity perceptions (women in 'support' not 'line' roles).
April, Dreyer & Blass (2007)	Gender impediments to the South African boardroom	South African corporate boards / aspiring directors.	Qualitative interviews & thematic analysis (board members & female executives).	Tokenism, exclusionary networks, informal sponsorship deficits curtail influence even when seats are gained ('presence without power').	Sample size/context specificity; pre-King III / earlier governance era; may not reflect recent regulatory shifts.	Illuminates mechanism of status incongruity and symbolic inclusion—refining meso-level barriers beyond numeric representation.
Supplemental: Nkomo & Ngambi (2009)	Present but absent: Women in business leadership in South Africa	SA business leadership landscape (multi-industry).	Conceptual + secondary data synthesis; intersectional lens.	Highlights invisibility paradox: women present numerically in workforce but absent in strategic leadership; emphasises race–gender intersections.	Reliant on secondary sources of its time; predates more recent reforms.	Supplies meso-level framework; anchors intersectional analysis feeding role congruity adaptation.
Msimanga & Goba (2016)	The influence of unstable coalition governments in Gauteng metropolitan municipalities.	STEM education pipeline (schools, universities) & early careers in SA.	Qualitative (interviews).	Educational leaks: bias, limited mentorship, resource disparities reduce persistence of women in STEM tracks feeding technical leadership.	Potential regional focus; limited longitudinal tracking; manufacturing application inferred not measured.	Connects early pipeline attrition to later scarcity of female leaders in technical/ manufacturing roles (role congruity formed early).

Source: Researcher's own compilation

3.12 WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

The present situation of women in leadership roles illustrates a contradiction of advancement and ongoing inequity that is influenced by global and regional disparities stemming from both structural opportunities and systemic obstacles. Although women currently hold around 34% of senior leadership positions worldwide, a slight rise of merely 0.5 percentage points from the prior year, this numerical progress conceals persistent disparities, particularly at the uppermost levels of authority. For example, merely 8.8% of Fortune 500 corporations are governed by female CEOs, a clear indication of ongoing exclusion from senior executive roles (Grant Thornton, 2025; Keevee, 2025). The researchers, Eagly and Carli (2007), contended that this under-representation is not merely attributable to a pipeline issue but is rather the result of a multifaceted interaction of gendered expectations, biases, and workplace cultures that obstruct women's progression, particularly beyond middle management.

Political representation exhibits a comparable pattern, with women occupying merely 26.5% of legislative positions, and 22.9% of ministerial responsibilities worldwide (WEF, 2025). Feminist political economists emphasise that this disparity extends beyond issues of equity, and it yields significant economic repercussions. Research indicates that a 10-percentage point increase in women's representation in parliament is associated with a 0.7% increase in gross domestic product (GDP) (WEF, 2025), corroborating Kabeer's (2016) assertion that inclusive governance improves social policy results and economic development.

Sectoral analysis indicates disparate advancement, with sectors like healthcare and education exhibiting elevated female leadership (49% and 54%, respectively), while male-dominated fields such as technology and finance demonstrate greater resistance to gender integration, with female representation at merely 17% and 21% (Keevee, 2025). This corroborates Acker's (2006) thesis of 'gendered organisations', which asserts that industries frequently perpetuate gender hierarchies via established conventions and recruitment procedures that preferentially benefit men. The enduring occupational segregation signifies both cultural stagnation and institutional shortcomings in addressing structural injustices.

South Africa offers a multifaceted yet somewhat more hopeful perspective. Women occupy 47.2% of senior management positions in mid-market enterprises, exceeding global averages (Grant Thornton, 2025). However, the under-representation of women in executive leadership is significant, with about 7.2% of CEOs in listed companies being women (IOL, 2025).

Nevertheless, numerous obstacles persist that hinder advancement for women. A significant concern is the 'glass cliff' phenomenon, wherein women are more frequently appointed to leadership positions during crises, as evidenced by Ryan and Haslam's (2005) research, which heightens their likelihood of failure and subsequent expulsion. Han (2023) corroborated this, indicating that female CEOs are 45% more susceptible to dismissal than their male counterparts. This tendency not only illustrates gendered risk distribution but also indicates the precariousness of women's leadership in unstable environments.

The gender pay gap continues to exist worldwide, with women receiving approximately 20% less than men for comparable employment. In South Africa, projections indicate that it could take more than a century to bridge this gap, if prevailing patterns continue (Mafu, 2024; IOL, 2025). Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality underscores that women of colour encounter compounded discrimination, a notion corroborated by Keevee's (2025) finding that Black women constitute less than 2% of Fortune 500 CEOs.

A variety of measures have been implemented globally to address these inequities. Gender quotas have been effective in enhancing women's political representation, as evidenced by Rwanda, where women occupy more than 60% of parliamentary seats (IOL, 2025). Despite their contentious nature, quotas have been advocated by researchers like Dahlerup (2006), who contended that they dismantle established patterns of exclusion and stimulate cultural transformation.

South Africa is investigating analogous strategies to promote gender parity in leadership. Moreover, workplace policies that include flexible work arrangements, prolonged maternity leave, and reintegration programmes are increasingly becoming prevalent, corroborating Hewlett and Luce's (2005) claim that it is essential to facilitate a work-life balance to retain female talent (Angayarkanni, Sharma, Moorthygari, Siddiqui & Sharma, 2024; Times of India, 2025). Additionally, mentorship and

leadership development initiatives, such as the Basic Education Women in Leadership Conference, are essential for fostering networks and mitigating the isolation frequently encountered by women in leadership (EduWomen Leaders, 2025).

3.13 PATRIARCHY IN THE MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Gottfried (2013), Martin (2017), and Lee, Kim and Park (2021) contended that discussions on gender inequality in the manufacturing sector highlight a persistent pattern of gendered labour market segmentation rooted in patriarchal organisational structures. Similarly, Tilly and Tilly (1998), Martin (2017), and Loignon and Kodydek (2022) noted that many experts agree that the under-representation of women in low-skilled, low-paid, and precarious jobs, compared to men in technical and leadership roles, cannot be explained solely by individual choices or qualifications.

Liu *et al.* (2015) and Elliott and Stead (2018) emphasised that a systematic socio-cultural framework underpins institutional activities. Furthermore, Ford and Harding (2018) and Ladkin and Patrick (2022) argued that patriarchal norms reinforce the perceptions of men as natural leaders and providers, while confining women to the traditional supportive roles. Patterson *et al.* (2014), Ashcraft and Muhr (2018), and Kimbu *et al.* (2021) observed that these ideological constructs are maintained through recruitment, organisational culture, and promotion practices, thus institutionalising inequality.

Various scholars (Anker, 2001; Gill, 2014; ILO, 2017; Lewis *et al.*, 2017; Ronen, 2018) have identified two main forms of this structural imbalance, namely: horizontal segregation, where women are concentrated in feminised roles like assembly-line jobs, and vertical segregation, which limits their progress into technical and managerial roles. Browne and Misra (2003), Mavin and Grandy (2019), and Karmakar (2022) contended that, despite having similar qualifications and skills, women encounter many challenges, such as restricted access to professional growth, exclusion from influential male networks, and ongoing stereotypes about their work commitment related to domestic duties. Booyesen and Nkomo (2010) observed that these challenges have been heightened in post-apartheid South Africa, where the intersections of gender, race, and class have exacerbated structural inequalities in employment within the manufacturing sector.

Compared to men, women tend to spend more time on tasks with lower promotability, which reduces their involvement in higher-promotability tasks (Winslow, 2010; Mitchell & Hesli, 2013; Babcock, Recalde, Vesterlund & Weingart, 2017; Guarino & Borden, 2017; O'Meara, Knudsen & Jones, 2017; El-Alayli *et al.*, 2018; Miller & Roksa, 2020). This disparity contributes to gender inequality with regard to promotions and highlights how task allocation maintains workplace gender disparities (Babcock *et al.*, 2022).

These perspectives collectively demonstrate how patriarchal ideology and labour market segmentation uphold discriminatory practices (Ahmed, 2022; Asghar, Batool & Farooq, 2020). Although the forms of marginalisation may vary by context, the main effect consistently reinforces inequality, thereby hindering progress toward inclusive and gender-equitable workplaces (Adamson & Kelan, 2019). Scholars have suggested that the organisational standards should be re-evaluated, and targeted policies should be implemented to address systemic inequities and to ensure fair access to opportunities (Acker 1990; Correll, Benard & Paik, 2020).

3.14 THE BUSINESS CASE FOR WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Despite increasing recognition of the benefits of leadership diversity, women remain under-represented in decision-making roles globally, a disparity that not only hinders organisational performance but also broader economic and social progress (Saenz, Wu, Uddaraju, Nafei & Liu, 2025). This under-representation is particularly evident in top executive positions, with only 6.4% of S&P 500 CEOs being women in 2022, and a mere 31% of senior leadership roles globally being held by women in 2021 (Farhan, 2022).

The persistent undervaluation of women in these critical roles overlooks the substantial evidence indicating that greater gender diversity in leadership correlates with enhanced financial performance and innovation outcomes (Hoobler *et al.*, 2016; Lin *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, the integration of women into leadership roles can foster a strategic advantage, promoting more efficient organisational practices and superior decision-making capabilities due to their unique perspectives and collaborative leadership styles (Chadwick & Dawson, 2018; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). This integration is not merely an ethical consideration but a strategic imperative that

demonstrably improves financial returns, particularly in organisations prioritising gender and ethnic diversity (Kouam *et al.*, 2024).

The burgeoning interest in female leadership stems from growing evidence suggesting that companies with a higher representation of women in executive positions often exhibit superior financial performance (Offermann & Foley, 2020). This positive correlation is not merely coincidental but is often attributed to the multifaceted benefits that women leaders bring, including improved decision-making processes, enhanced innovation, and the cultivation of a more positive work environment (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023).

A meta-analysis further supports this, indicating that women's leadership can positively influence firm performance generally, and sales performance specifically, especially within more gender-egalitarian cultures (Hoobler *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, research consistently indicates a positive relationship between gender diversity in senior corporate positions and firm performance, particularly within sectors characterised by a larger female workforce and those demanding complementary skills (Kouam *et al.*, 2024).

Despite their proven competencies, which are often on par with or exceed those of their male counterparts, women continue to face significant barriers to ascending to leadership roles (Scheuer *et al.*, 2025). These impediments frequently stem from deeply entrenched gendered social statuses within organisations, which can compromise the efficacy of initiatives designed to support women's career advancement (Kouam *et al.*, 2024).

Nevertheless, research from McKinsey, Credit Suisse, and others consistently demonstrates that companies with greater gender and ethnic diversity in management are more likely to achieve above-average financial returns, with those in the top quartile for gender diversity being 15% more likely to have returns above the industry average (Tjahjana *et al.*, 2024; Kouam *et al.*, 2024). This robust correlation underscores the direct economic benefits of inclusive leadership practices, moving beyond ethical arguments to highlight strategic advantages (Chadwick & Dawson, 2018).

3.15 MORAL AND ETHICAL CASE FOR WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

The discourse surrounding women in leadership roles extends beyond mere representation, delving into profound moral and ethical justifications for their inclusion. As discussed above, evidence suggests that female leadership is associated with more effective outcomes, particularly during uncertain conditions (Stajkovic & Stajković, 2023). This is largely attributable to the inherent qualities often demonstrated by women leaders, such as empathy, openness, and a propensity for building strong relationships, which contribute significantly to effective leadership paradigms (Brzezińska, 2023). Furthermore, a nuanced examination reveals that while certain leadership styles are often associated with women, categorising them as inherently 'feminine ideals' risks typecasting and limiting the understanding of women's leadership to a binary opposition with masculine approaches (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020).

Instead, a more robust framework is needed to understand how women's leadership manifests, incorporating diverse strategies that move beyond simplistic gendered comparisons (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). This framework should encompass how women leaders navigate and often overcome systemic barriers, such as role incongruity, which has historically impacted perceptions of female leaders and their influence within organisations (Pors, 2021).

The scarcity of women in top management and on boards of directors underscores not only the biological gender obstacles but also the socially constructed challenges that impede their advancement (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). This necessitates a critical re-evaluation of established norms and biases within selection processes to ensure transparency and objectivity in appointments (Pors, 2021).

Moreover, addressing the 'glass cliff' phenomenon, where women are disproportionately appointed to precarious leadership positions during crises, requires an understanding of how moral values might influence these appointments (Stajkovic & Stajković, 2023). Such situations can highlight the ethical awareness and decision-making capabilities of women leaders, as they often exhibit higher ethical sensitivity and justice-oriented reactions (Dahlan, 2023). This ethical sensitivity, coupled with their propensity for inclusive decision-making, can lead to more sustainable and

equitable organisational outcomes, challenging the traditional, often male-dominated, leadership paradigms (Lin *et al.*, 2023).

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3.16 CONCLUSION OF THE CHAPTER

A prevailing theme in current research focuses on obstacles to women's leadership progression, including exclusion from professional networks and discriminatory recruitment practices. Researchers, such as Hillman, Cannella, and Paetzold (2000) and Singh *et al.* (2008) have contended that the selection processes for executive positions are frequently informal and dependent on personal endorsement factors that systematically disadvantage women due to gendered social capital and ingrained biases. Kakabadse *et al.* (2015) also emphasised that gatekeeping techniques and 'old boys' networks' restrict women's visibility in candidate pools, perpetuating the exclusionary cycles.

A shift is occurring in the literature, as authors like Branson (2007), Burgess and Tharenou (2002), and Mattis (2000) have started to identify situations that could facilitate the removal of these barriers. These encompass organisational commitment to diversity, inclusive leadership development pathways, and intentional mentorship programmes. Ryan and Haslam's (2007) 'glass cliff' concept highlights a gendered constraint and underscores how contextualising leadership opportunities might reveal underlying prejudices in the promotion of women. Simultaneously, Fitzsimmons (2012) and Sandgren (2012) advocated for the redefinition of leadership criteria to include a variety of talents and life experiences, thereby contesting the prevailing masculine-coded leadership paradigms.

This chapter asserted that comprehending the gendered dynamics of talent management (TM) necessitates a meso-level analytical framework that recognises the interaction between individual agency, corporate culture, and overarching societal

norms. This viewpoint, endorsed by Ely (1995) and Gorman (2005), facilitates a nuanced comprehension of the intersection between gender identities and TM techniques. It acknowledges that although women may have the necessary qualifications, their progression depends on how companies implement merit, visibility, and sponsorship within a framework shaped by structural injustice.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter focused on the theoretical framework of the study and adopted a meso-level perspective. An integrated multi-level theoretical framework was developed to explain the barriers that hinder women's progression into managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry. The framework provided a comprehensive explanation of women's leadership advancement in South Africa's manufacturing sector through an intersectional African feminist lens.

This chapter presents the research methodology employed to investigate the factors that hinder women's advancement into managerial and executive positions within South Africa's manufacturing industry. Based on the problem statement and the study's importance, the following research questions were explored in this study:

- How does culture in the manufacturing industry contribute to or hinder the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions?
- To what extent do stereotypes about women's abilities and roles affect their progression into managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry?
- How are talent management initiatives in the manufacturing industry supporting the advancement of women managers into executive roles, and how are these initiatives perceived by them?
- How does the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors influence the advancement opportunities for women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry?
- How does the manufacturing sector use talent management to support women in advancing to leadership and executive roles?

The study is guided by a constructivist–interpretivist research philosophy, while the research approach adopts an African feminist perspective. A qualitative methodology using a case study research design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives.

The study population was selected from the manufacturing industry, and a non-probability sampling strategy was utilised. Interviews were adopted as the primary data collection method. Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, with the support of ATLAS.ti for data processing and code generation. The sections that follow provide a detailed discussion of the research methodology and procedures adopted in this study.

4.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY: CONSTRUCTIVIST–INTERPRETIVIST

Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and addresses questions concerning what constitutes knowledge, who can be regarded as a knower, and how knowledge is generated and validated (Stanley, 1990). Research is shaped by the philosophical assumptions held by researchers regarding reality, knowledge, and human experience, which in turn influence how social phenomena are interpreted and investigated (Creswell, 2007).

This study was grounded in a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed through human interaction, experience, and interpretation (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). From this perspective, knowledge is not objective or fixed but is developed through engagement between the researcher and participants. The study therefore sought to understand how participants constructed and interpreted their experiences of talent management, gender inequality, and leadership advancement within the manufacturing sector.

A feminist epistemological lens further informed the study by recognising that gender influences knowledge production, social experiences, and power relations (Anderson, 2011). Feminist epistemology challenges traditional assumptions of objectivity by acknowledging that researchers' identities, experiences, and social positions inevitably shape the research process (Letherby, 2003). Consequently, the researcher adopted a reflexive approach throughout the study, critically reflecting on their own positionality and its influence on data collection and interpretation.

The constructivist–interpretivist paradigm was considered appropriate because the study prioritised participants lived experiences and subjective meanings rather than seeking objective or universal truths. Meaning was co-constructed through dialogue,

interaction, and reflection between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2007). This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of how organisational cultures, gender stereotypes, and social structures shape women's leadership experiences within the manufacturing sector.

Furthermore, feminist research advocates for knowledge production that is inclusive, participatory, and transformative (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Accordingly, this study sought to centre women's voices and experiences while critically examining the structural and organisational factors influencing leadership advancement.

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH: AFRICAN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

This study adopted an African feminist perspective as the most appropriate theoretical lens for examining women's advancement into leadership positions within South Africa's manufacturing sector. As discussed in Sections 1.5 and 3.6.1, African feminism provides a contextually grounded framework for understanding gender relations within Africa's unique socio-historical, political, and economic realities.

Unlike Western feminist theories, which often universalise women's experiences, African feminism recognises that African women's experiences are shaped by the intersections of gender, race, class, culture, colonialism, and historical inequality (Cole & Symes 2020). In the South African context, colonialism and apartheid institutionalised patriarchal labour systems that confined women to subordinate roles while limiting their economic participation and leadership advancement (Steady, 1996). The migrant labour system further reinforced gender inequalities by positioning women primarily as caregivers and excluding them from decision-making and economic power structures.

African feminism therefore enables a critical examination of how historical and structural inequalities continue to influence organisational cultures, gender identities, and leadership opportunities in contemporary workplaces (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). Waller and Marcos (2005) argue that, for African women, the struggle for gender equality cannot be separated from broader struggles against racial oppression, economic inequality, and the enduring effects of colonialism.

Guided by this perspective, the study adopted a meso-level approach that considered the interaction between individual, organisational, and societal factors influencing

talent management and women's leadership advancement within the manufacturing sector. This approach enabled the researcher to examine how organisational systems, workplace cultures, gender stereotypes, and broader societal norms collectively shape leadership experiences for both male and female participants.

Overall, African feminism provided a contextually relevant lens through which the study critically explored gendered organisational realities within South Africa's manufacturing industry while centring the lived experiences and voices of participants.

4.4 RESEARCH DESIGN STRATEGY

4.4.1 Qualitative Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, which was considered most appropriate for exploring the complex and socially constructed experiences of leadership advancement, gender inequality, and talent management within the manufacturing sector.

Qualitative research focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences, meanings, and social realities within their natural contexts (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Unlike quantitative approaches, which rely primarily on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research enables an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of social phenomena.

The choice of a qualitative methodology was further informed by feminist research principles, which emphasise the importance of giving voice to participants and understanding experiences within their social and historical contexts (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Letherby, 2015). Existing studies on women in leadership and executive management have predominantly adopted quantitative approaches (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Terjesen *et al.*, 2009). However, such approaches may overlook the complexity and depth of women's lived experiences within organisational settings.

Qualitative methodology was therefore considered suitable because it allowed participants to express their experiences in their own words, enabling the researcher to gain deeper insight into organisational culture, gender stereotypes, leadership barriers, and talent management practices within the manufacturing sector. The methodology also enabled the researcher to engage directly with participants within

their organisational environment, thereby facilitating a nuanced understanding of the social realities shaping women's advancement into leadership positions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Through this approach, the study generated rich, detailed narratives that contributed to understanding how leadership experiences are socially constructed and influenced by organisational and societal factors.

4.4.2 Qualitative Single Case Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative single case study design to explore women's leadership advancement and talent management practices within a manufacturing organisation in South Africa.

Case study research is particularly suitable for investigating complex social and organisational phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). The design enabled the researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, organisational culture, gender dynamics, and talent management processes within the selected organisation.

A single organisational case study was employed, consistent with the study's meso-level focus on the interaction between organisational systems, individual experiences, and broader societal influences. Executive and managerial employees within the selected organisation served as participants in the study.

The case study design was considered appropriate because it facilitated a detailed examination of leadership experiences across gender lines while allowing for the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences among participants (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Furthermore, case studies are valuable in generating rich empirical insights and supporting the development of conceptual and theoretical frameworks (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021).

The study utilised semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. This method allowed participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences, perceptions, and strategies related to women's leadership advancement and talent management within the manufacturing sector. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews also enabled the researcher to probe emerging themes and gain deeper insight into participants lived realities.

Overall, the qualitative case study design aligned with the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm and African feminist perspective underpinning the study, as it prioritised context, lived experience, and the co-construction of meaning.

4.5 POPULATION AND SAMPLING STRATEGY

This section outlines the target population and sampling strategy utilised in the study. The sampling process was guided by the qualitative nature of the study and the need to obtain rich, detailed insights from participants with relevant knowledge and experience relating to women's leadership advancement and talent management within the manufacturing sector.

4.5.1 Population

The target population for this study consisted of executive and managerial employees within the selected manufacturing industry (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). These participants were considered appropriate because of their involvement in leadership, organisational decision-making, and talent management processes within the organisation.

The population included both male and female participants to ensure diverse perspectives regarding women's leadership advancement, organisational culture, gender dynamics, and talent management practices within the manufacturing sector.

4.5.2 Sampling Strategy: Non-Probability Sampling

This study utilised a non-probability sampling strategy, specifically purposive sampling, to select participants who possessed relevant knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon under investigation.

Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research because it enables the researcher to intentionally select information-rich participants capable of providing detailed and meaningful insights into the research problem (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). The sampling approach aligned with the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation.

Participants were therefore selected based on their leadership roles, organisational experience, and involvement in talent management and leadership development

processes within the organisation. This approach ensured that the data collected was relevant, detailed, and aligned with the objectives of the study.

Sampling involves selecting specific individuals or units from a larger population to gain insights related to the research problem (Cooper & Schindler, 2008). Non-probability sampling is a method in which not all individuals or elements in a population have an equal or known chance of being selected (Creswell, 2014). This differs from probability sampling, where each member of the population has a known, non-zero chance of being chosen. Non-probability sampling is often used when creating a complete list of the population is difficult, or when participants are deliberately selected based on specific criteria (Creswell, 2014). Despite its limitations, it's important that even small samples accurately reflect the characteristics relevant to the study population (Welman *et al.*, 2003).

In qualitative studies, sampling is typically purposive and closely aligned with the research objectives (Creswell, 2014). The specific type of non-probability sampling used in this study was purposive sampling, where participants were intentionally chosen based on specific attributes or experiences that aligned with the study's objectives (Creswell, 2014). Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling is strategic, aiming to include individuals who can provide valuable insights into the research questions. Several subtypes of purposive sampling exist, depending on the nature of the study (Creswell, 2014).

The participants in this study were employees in the manufacturing sector based in Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa. The target population included both male and female employees in managerial and executive roles, considering their diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. However, demographic variables, such as race and culture, were used as inclusion criteria, and there was no specific age requirement for participation.

Since qualitative research typically involves smaller sample sizes, such samples are not representative of the broader population, and therefore, do not aim to generate generalisable results (Zikmund, 2003). Consequently, the current study did not seek to apply its findings to all women but instead aimed to provide a detailed understanding based on the experiences of selected individuals.

As a result, purposive sampling was used, focusing on participants whose knowledge, perspectives, and experiences were especially relevant to the study's objectives (Bryman, 2004). Ulin *et al.* (2002) emphasised that purposive sampling aims to select individuals who can provide rich, detailed information relevant to the topic being studied.

The research specifically targeted the manufacturing industry because of its gender composition, which offers a wealth of information for examining talent management practices. Twenty interviews were conducted with individuals in managerial and executive roles, all selected based on criteria established beforehand that aligned with the study's objectives (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

4.5.3 Sample size

According to Flick (2014), sample size refers to the number of units or participants involved in the research. It is crucial to establish an adequate sample size in qualitative research because it must align with the study's goals and the complexity of the phenomena under investigation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Practical considerations, such as the time needed for participant selection, conducting interviews, transcription, and data analysis, were also considered (Blandford *et al.*, 2016). In the current study, data collection continued until data saturation was reached, which is the point when no new insights or themes emerge from the interviews (Court, 2018).

Research indicates that theoretical saturation is usually reached after around 12 interviews (Blandford, Furniss & Makri, 2016). Studies by Francis *et al.* (2010) showed that saturation for behavioural beliefs often occurs by the 15th interview, normative beliefs by the 13th, and control beliefs by the 14th. Evidence suggests that 97% of relevant codes can be identified by the 12th interview (Francis *et al.*, 2010). In PhD research, this typically corresponds to 30 to 40 hours of qualitative data collection (Blandford *et al.*, 2016).

Saturation is generally considered achieved when no new belief categories or values emerge during the final stages of data collection, however, it may not always be feasible to determine the exact point of saturation in advance (Planing, 2014). In some qualitative studies, a small, purposefully selected sample that provides rich, contextually relevant information may be more advantageous than a larger, less focused sample (Planing, 2014).

Hennink and Kaiser (2022) established that saturation generally occurs after twelve to thirteen interviews. The current study reached theoretical saturation by the 13th interview, with no new themes or codes emerging from the data. The study recruited 20 participants from the selected manufacturing organisation.

While a sample size of 20 may seem limited quantitatively, qualitative studies frequently depend on smaller, information-dense samples that facilitate a thorough investigation of intricate social and organisational phenomena (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020). The saturation point, at which no new themes or insights were generated, was reached within this group, confirming the sufficiency of the sample. The participants' seniority guaranteed the credibility and depth of responses, offsetting the small number of participants. This sample size was a deliberate methodological choice aimed at ensuring quality and insight over numerical generalisability. The sample's composition illustrates the industry's leadership and operational variety, as demonstrated in Table 4.1.

4.5.4 Identification and selection of the population

The participants in this study were selected from the specified manufacturing industry and mostly held roles such as Vice President, Director, Senior Manager, and Manager, as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Participant demographic details

Pseudonym	Position	Gender	Race	Years of experience
Ben	Director	Male	White	16
Tony	Director	Male	White	15
Linda	Director	Female	Black	18
Cyntia	Senior Manager	Female	Black	10
Nancy	Director	Female	Black	20
Nisha	Senior Manager	Female	Indian	16
James	Senior Manager	Male	Black	13
Cate	Vice President	Female	Black	22
Kenny	Senior Manager	Male	Indian	21
Lucy	Senior Manager	Female	Indian	15
Susan	Manager	Female	Indian	19
Joseph	Senior Manager	Male	Black	13
Charles	Manager	Male	Black	21
Kare	Senior Manager	Female	Black	18
Richard	Director	Male	Indian	23
Lisa	Senior Manager	Female	Black	20
Betty	Senior Manager	Female	White	16
Ashley	Director	Female	Indian	22
Emily	Director	Female	White	20
Donald	Senior Manager	Male	White	21

The researcher developed specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to guide participant selection for the study. These criteria were designed to ensure that participants played active roles in strategy implementation during the pandemic. The detailed criteria used for selecting participants are presented in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Category	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Gender	Include women and men at various levels within the selected manufacturing industry.	–
Employment status	Include both full-time and part-time employees.	–
Industry	Include individuals working specifically in the selected manufacturing industry.	Exclude individuals working in industries other than the selected manufacturing industry.
Geographical location	Include participants employed within South Africa.	Exclude participants employed outside of South Africa.
Position	Include men and women in managerial and executive roles.	Exclude individuals not employed in the manufacturing industry or holding informal roles (e.g., interns, temporary staff and entry level positions).
Organisational tenure	Include men and women with varying levels of tenure.	Exclude individuals with very short tenure (e.g., probationary periods).
Age	Include men and women of between 30 to 65 years age groups	Exclude individuals between 18 to 21 years

To examine the factors that hinder women's progress in reaching managerial or executive roles in South Africa's manufacturing sector and to analyse how these factors vary within cultural, systemic, and organisational contexts, participants were selected from senior management, middle management, and highly skilled production levels. These hierarchical levels were chosen to gain insights from individuals involved in both decision-making and implementation related to women's advancement.

The participants needed to have been permanently employed by the organisation for at least one year to ensure they were familiar with internal structures and policies. The sample included individuals from diverse gender and racial backgrounds within the manufacturing industry, ensuring a broad and inclusive range of perspectives. The selection criteria prioritised individuals with direct knowledge or experience related to the advancement of women in the sector (Wang, 2015).

In defining the unit of analysis, the current study considered the principle of consistency, which means that results should remain stable if replicated in similar

contexts (Planing, 2014). This approach was supported by interviewing multiple participants across different organisational levels within the manufacturing setting, enabling triangulation and increasing the reliability of the findings (Planing, 2014).

4.6 DATA COLLECTION

This section outlines the components of the data-collection method used in the current study. According to Yin (2011), qualitative data-collection methods include interviews, conversations, observation, analysing documents, and interpreting emotional expressions. For this study, interviews were deemed the most suitable method for collecting data. The interview methodology adopted by the current study involved using open-ended questions to allow for a more in-depth understanding of participants' viewpoints (Curtis & Curtis, 2017).

Data collection started in June 2024, when the researcher provided the People Director of the chosen manufacturing firm with the semi-structured interview guide, participation information sheet, ethics approval form, and informed consent form. Suitable participants were identified through inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the final candidate list was shared with the People Director. An email was then sent to these selected individuals, attaching the participation information sheet and a formal permission letter from the People Director. This email invited participation and encouraged recipients to contact the researcher for further details or to confirm their willingness. Interested participants received the informed consent form and participation information sheet, which detailed the study's aims, the nature of participation, confidentiality, data protection, voluntary involvement, and the right to withdraw at any time.

The interviews were conducted online, with participants' consent for audio recording. Scheduling was coordinated individually, mostly during lunch breaks to reduce work disruption. When unavailable during working hours, interviews were rescheduled to weekends or after hours. Privacy was maintained by choosing quiet settings and using headphones during interviews. In total, 20 interviews were conducted with a varied group, including vice presidents, senior managers, and middle managers. Table 4.3 lists the overall number of participants in the study. The interviews took place from June 2024 to April 2025.

Table 4.3: Overall number of participants for the study

Category	Women	Men	Total
Total number of participants	12	8	20
Race			
Black	6	3	9
Indian	3	3	6
White	3	2	5
Age range	Early 30s to 50s	35 to 55+	
Roles			
Vice President	1	0	1
Directors	4	3	7
Senior Managers	6	4	10
Managers	1	1	2

Twenty participants were interviewed, comprising 12 women and 8 men. The racial distribution was: 9 Black individuals (6 women, 3 men), 6 Indian individuals (3 women, 3 men), and 5 White individuals (3 women, 2 men). Women ranged from their early 30s to 50s, while men's ages spanned from 35 to over 55.

The total of 20 participants that were interviewed, represents a substantial sample size for qualitative research (Planing, 2014). The researcher adapted the content and sequence of questions dynamically in response to participant feedback, allowing flexibility to tailor the interview process in real time (Planing, 2014). The researcher's approach was characterised by patience, respect, and active listening, which fostered participant engagement and encouraged their active involvement in the study (Court, 2018).

Ultimately, this study contributed to creating new knowledge about the talent management framework designed to promote women in the South African manufacturing industry.

4.6.1 Data-collection instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used in this study because of its inherent flexibility (Tracy, 2019; Court, 2018). This data-collection method included pre-planned

questions designed to gather specific information (Blandford *et al.*, 2016). However, as the interviews went on, new questions naturally arose, enabling a dynamic and interactive discussion (Court, 2018). The semi-structured format allowed participants to expand beyond the initial questions in the guide (Tracy, 2019).

One key advantage of using a semi-structured interview guide is that it allows the researcher to listen attentively, reflect on responses, adapt the questioning approach, and maintain overall control of the interview process (Tracy, 2019). This interview style is widely regarded as the most popular among various interview types, primarily because it permits follow-up questions based on participant answers and offers the flexibility to reorder questions as needed (Planing, 2014).

Care was taken to ensure that the questions stayed within the participants' ability to answer comfortably, avoiding any unnecessary stress. The language used throughout was accessible and suitable for everyday communication (Planing, 2014). The researcher showed skill in conducting these less structured interviews, remaining alert and responsive by asking follow-up questions, as needed (Tracy, 2019; Court, 2018). Drawing on previous professional experience in interviewing, the researcher encouraged participants to share additional stories and kept an open conversational environment that allowed participants to ask questions as well (Blandford *et al.*, 2016).

4.6.1.1 Description and entities of the data-collection instrument

The data-collection tool was carefully designed to match the study's goals, while ensuring a comfortable and engaging experience for participants. It started with an introductory statement aimed at building rapport, helping participants feel at ease with the interview process, and requesting their consent to be recorded during the virtual sessions. This introduction also reiterated the study's purpose and helped create a positive environment for open dialogue (Blandford *et al.*, 2016).

To contextualise participants' responses, the researcher first gathered general background information through three open-ended questions. These questions examined the participants' work experience, how long they had worked in the government sector, and the number of officials reporting to them. This method helped the researcher understand the participants' organisational roles and levels of responsibility (Blandford *et al.*, 2016).

The core of the data-collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide with 21 open-ended questions. These questions were aligned with the study's four secondary objectives, and divided into the following five sections:

- Organisational Culture,
- Stereotype,
- Talent Management,
- Intersectionality, and
- Efficient Talent Management Strategy.

This setup helped ensure the questions covered both strategic and practical aspects of talent management and the advancement of women in the manufacturing industry. The total interview time was nearly 13 hours and 20 minutes, with each interview lasting about 45 to 60 minutes. The transcripts totalled 340 pages.

4.6.1.2 Refinement of the semi-structured interview guide

The semi-structured interview guide was refined through a pre-test aimed at improving its clarity, relevance, and effectiveness. To achieve this, the researcher shared the draft questionnaire with a middle manager who had 20 years of experience in the sector, including extensive expertise in talent management and human resource management.

This pre-test exercise occurred in March 2024 before the fieldwork began. The feedback from the middle manager was crucial in enhancing the questionnaire, leading to the revision of several questions to ensure they were clear, correctly worded, and aligned with the study's objectives. The pre-test also allowed the researcher to evaluate the overall structure and flow of the interview, estimate its duration, and confirm the feasibility of using Microsoft Teams to record the sessions (Busetto *et al.*, 2020:7). The revised semi-structured interview guide is included in Appendix D.

4.6.2 Informed consent

Informed consent means participants agree to join a study with full knowledge of its goals (Tracy, 2019; Yin, 2011). From the start, participants received a consent form that explained the research purpose and the procedures involved (Tracy, 2019). The researcher made sure that participants felt safe, not pressured, and free from any risk

or coercion (Blandford *et al.*, 2016:17; Tracy, 2019). At the beginning of each virtual interview, participants were reminded they could withdraw at any time without facing negative consequences (Tracy, 2019; Yin, 2011).

The participants formally gave their consent by signing the consent form prior to the interview. The researcher also provided each participant with both the signed ethics approval letter and the consent form to assist in their decision-making. Additionally, explicit permission was obtained to record the interviews (Yin, 2011). To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, the researcher used pseudonyms for all participants, ensuring their real names were not included in any transcripts (Tracy, 2019).

A comprehensive participant information sheet was distributed on 5 June 2024, providing additional details about the research (Blandford *et al.*, 2016). This document included information on the study's objectives, participant expectations, data management procedures, and how the results would be shared (Blandford *et al.*, 2016).

4.7 DATA-ANALYSIS METHOD

Numerous guidelines have been offered for data analysis over the years. After reviewing various frameworks, it became clear that thematic analysis, combined with a coding process, was best suited for this study. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to analyse the transcripts of the virtual recorded interviews, which were conducted via Microsoft Teams, and transcribed by an independent transcriber (Blandford *et al.*, 2016). This method also helped the researcher verify the data against the recordings to ensure the transcripts' accuracy (Yin, 2011). To gain a deep understanding of the content, the researcher immersed herself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, reflecting on them, and identifying emerging patterns (Tracy, 2019).

Thematic analysis follows a structured process: familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing those themes, defining and naming them, and ultimately producing a comprehensive report (Blandford *et al.*, 2016). To support this process, a formal coding methodology was adopted. Coding involved assigning words or phrases that represented facts or observable trends (Tracy, 2019). The coding process included several iterative steps: preliminary jottings,

pre-coding (creating new codes), first-cycle coding (renaming existing codes), refining first-level coding (splitting and merging codes), and second-cycle coding (building a hierarchy of codes and establishing relationships among them) (Saldana, 2009; Blandford *et al.*, 2016).

Given the large dataset involved in this study, the analysis was supported by the qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti (Blandford *et al.*, 2016). This tool was essential for organising and managing the data, making the analysis more systematic and transparent (Blandford *et al.*, 2016; Saldana, 2009). Additionally, ATLAS.ti helped the researcher to code data efficiently and develop themes. It also allowed for exporting data to Excel and MS Word for further review and interpretation (Saldana, 2009). This combination of thematic analysis and digital coding tools contributed to a thorough and credible interpretation of the qualitative data collected in the study.

For data analysis, open coding was performed using ATLAS.ti software, as described above. This approach was applied to data from 20 interviews, resulting in a total of 183 unique codes. The interview transcripts, initially transcribed with Speech-notes, were imported into ATLAS.ti for systematic coding and analysis. An excerpt from one of the interview transcripts is displayed in Figure 4.1, with another sample provided in Appendix E.

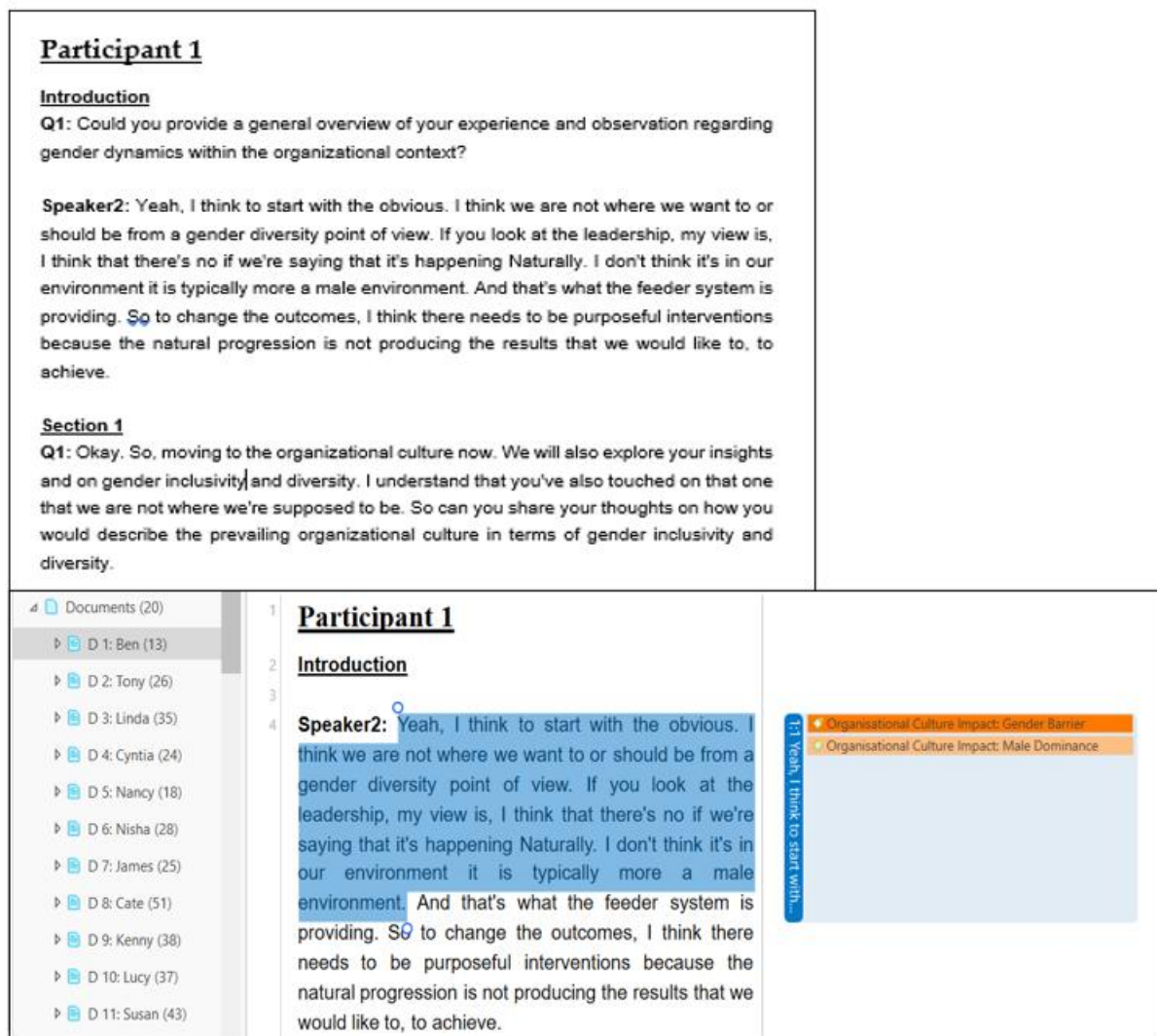


Figure 4.1: Participants' interview transcript on Atlas.ti

4.7.1 Preparing the data

To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all 20 individuals during data preparation. Each interview transcript was carefully checked for accuracy by comparing it with the corresponding audio recordings. To improve the credibility and consistency of the participants' responses, follow-up conversations occurred after each interview. This approach aimed to strengthen the confirmability of the research findings by grounding interpretations firmly in the participants' narratives, following guidance from Flick (2022) and Cho and Trent (2022). Engaging directly in data preparation also helped the researcher to identify recurring patterns early, which informed and supported subsequent stages of analysis.

Each transcript was carefully analysed, and relevant field notes collected during the interviews were typed, organised, and linked to the corresponding datasets. Field notes are crucial in qualitative research, as the processes of data collection and data analysis often overlap (Creswell, 2024). This phase, referred to by LeCompte (2023) as ‘tidying up’, is an essential step before coding and analysis. It involves reevaluating the research questions, aligning them with the gathered data, identifying any information gaps, and, if necessary, returning to the field for additional data collection. For the purposes of the current study, the collected data was sufficient to meet the research aims.

Following Creswell’s (2024) framework for qualitative data analysis and employing ATLAS.ti version 25, the next section details the analytical procedures adopted. Using software rather than manual methods significantly enhanced the efficiency of the coding process and improved data organisation (Creswell, 2024). Terms specific to ATLAS.ti are italicised at first use, with accompanying footnotes where needed. Each part begins by introducing the relevant dataset and explaining how raw data was systematically transformed into codes and categories within the software environment.

4.7.2 Datasets: Transcripts of the semi-structured interviews with the managers and executives

The dataset consisted of interview transcripts from 20 managerial and executive professionals within the manufacturing sector.

Step 1: Uploading research data into the software

Once all data sources, including interview transcripts and accompanying field notes, were carefully organised and prepared, a new project was initiated in ATLAS.ti. All relevant documents were then uploaded into the software. While each file was initially examined on its own, it was essential to import the files as a complete set to enable effective data comparison and cross-referencing across sources. This comprehensive upload also maximised the organisational and analytical capabilities of ATLAS.ti.

As shown in the ATLAS.ti report (Figure 4.2), the project included 20 interview transcripts.

Project: PHD Project	
Report created by Minah Tshabalala-Mzobe on 2025/05/06	
Document Report	
All (20) documents	
1 Ben	
Text document, 13 quotations	
2 Tony	
Text document, 26 quotations	
3 Linda	
Text document, 35 quotations	
4 Cyntia	
Text document, 24 quotations	
5 Nancy	
Text document, 18 quotations	
6 Nisha	
Text document, 28 quotations	
7 James	
Text document, 25 quotations	
8 Cate	

Figure 4.2: ATLAS.ti document report

Step 2: Reviewing the data

The dataset included 20 interview transcripts from senior managers and executives in the manufacturing sector. As shown in Figure 4.1, each transcript was initially examined individually, based on preliminary reflections noted during the transcription process, following the approach suggested by Tesch (1990). Transcripts were read multiple times to build familiarity with the data and develop a deeper understanding of the content.

In this early *open reading* stage, the emphasis was on identifying ‘what’ was present in the data, focusing on descriptive elements rather than interpretation or explanation of patterns (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). Throughout this stage, short memos and *free quotations* were created to record initial impressions. One dominant theme that surfaced during this phase was the influence of organisational culture on gender inclusion. Figure 4.3 displays an example of an ad hoc network linked to the *inclusivity* code, highlighting participants' views on gender inclusivity in their workplaces.

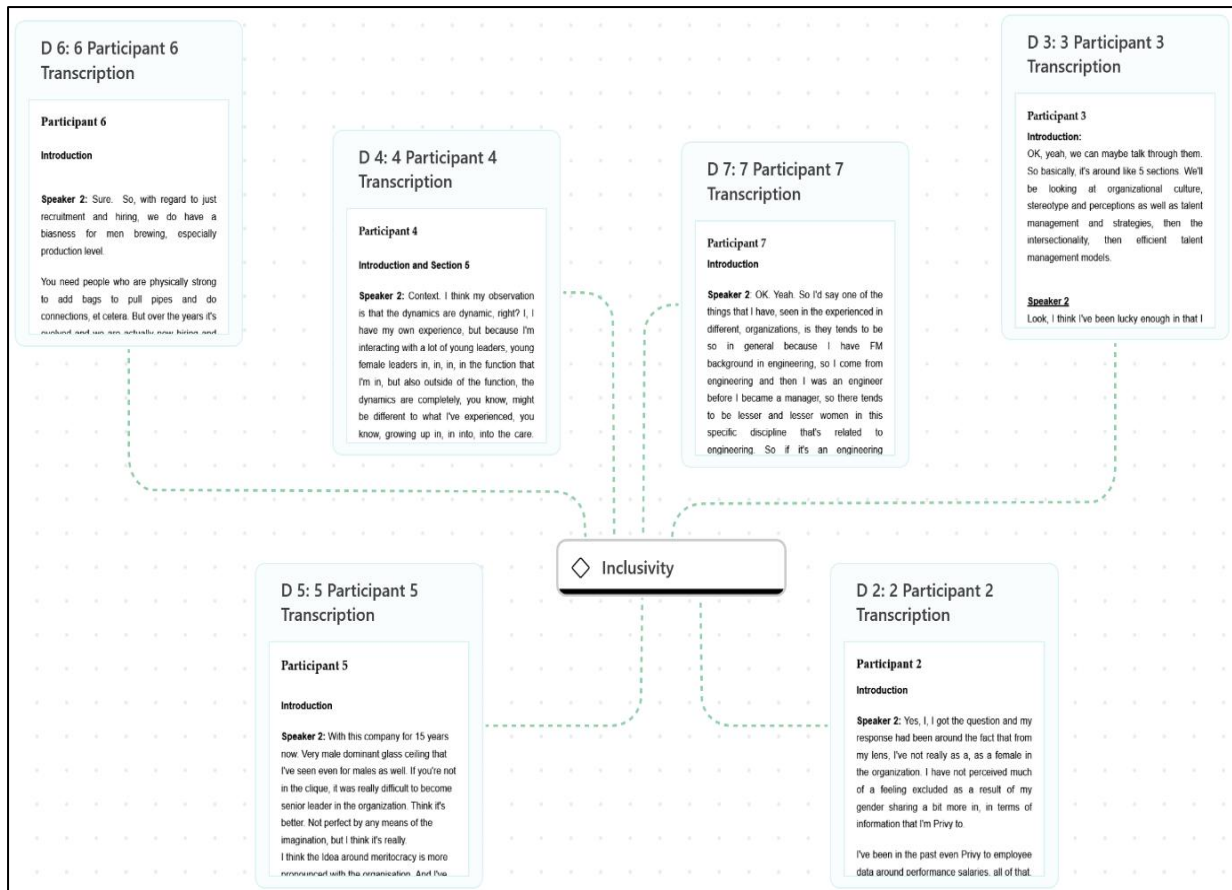


Figure 4.3: Ad hoc network of the prevailing organisational culture in terms of gender inclusivity

Step 3: Initiating the coding process

The coding phase of the study was guided by insights gained from an extensive literature review. According to Cohan *et al.* (2011), a code refers to a term or label assigned by the researcher to a portion of text to signify a particular concept or idea. Based on this understanding, text passages that discussed similar themes or conveyed related meanings were grouped under the same code.

The coding process started by assigning descriptive labels to specific text segments within each interview transcript. The majority of the codes were generated inductively using ATLAS.ti features, including in-vivo coding, auto-coding, and open coding, all based on emerging themes.

To demonstrate this process, Figure 4.4 showcases coded excerpts from the interviews with managers and executives in the manufacturing industry, focusing on

their perspectives regarding the organisation's culture of diversity and gender inclusivity.

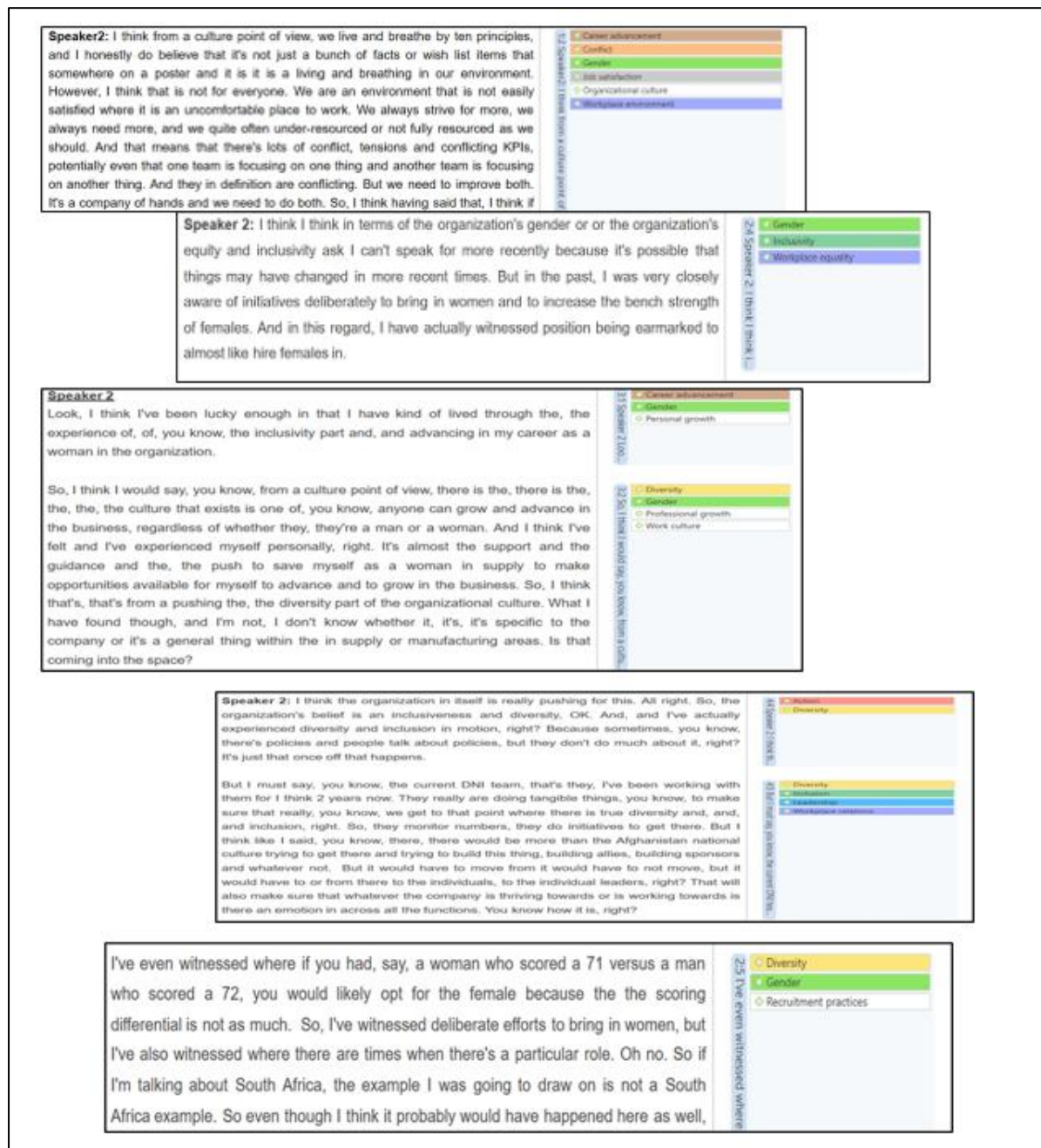


Figure 4.4: Coded segments of interview transcripts focusing on gender inclusivity and diversity

Codes, such as diversity, gender, and inclusivity, were assigned to relevant text segments, which are highlighted in green in Figure 4.4. This visual representation illustrates that the codes were directly grounded in the data. Furthermore, it shows that these individual codes were part of a broader network labelled 'inclusivity', reflecting their interconnection within the thematic structure of the analysis.

A key part of the analysis involved coding the data and identifying meaningful units at both the sentence and paragraph levels. As the coding process advanced, the number of codes naturally increased. To ensure consistency, previously coded transcripts were revisited to check whether newly developed codes could also be applied to earlier data. This iterative process helped minimise discrepancies and ensured uniformity across all transcripts.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2020), the coding process concludes when theoretical saturation is achieved, meaning no new insights emerge from the data. In this study, saturation was reached after generating 183 initial codes from the 20 interview transcripts. Figure 4.5 presents a screen from ATLAS.ti, displaying the first eleven (11) codes identified from the dataset.

	Name	Grounded	Density	Groups
●	◆ Inclusive Leadership	4	0	[Organisational Culture]
●	◆ Inclusivity	31	0	[Organisational Culture]
●	◆ KPI Tracking	3	1	[Organisational Culture]
●	◆ Lack of Development	16	0	[Organisational Culture]
●	◆ Leadership Advancement	38	1	[Organisational Culture]
●	◆ Male Dominance	8	0	[Organisational Culture]
●	◆ Mentorship	16	0	[Organisational Culture]
●	◆ Meritocracy	22	2	[Organisational Culture]
●	◆ Organisational Culture	1	0	[Organisational Culture]
○	◆ Organisational Initiatives	2	0	[Organisational Culture]
○	◆ Performance	3	1	[Organisational Culture]

Figure 4.5: Excel export of the first eleven (11) initial codes from the Dataset

Step 4: cluster together similar codes and go back to the data

The process of grouping the 183 initial codes began with a detailed examination of each code and its corresponding quotations to determine suitable clusters. Each group of codes was treated as a tentative category within the software, as recommended by Maykut and Morehouse (1994).

The software aided in making decisions about which codes should be combined or grouped together. As shown in Figure 4.5, many initial codes were well-supported by

the data, with some linked to over 25 quotations. However, the same figure also reveals codes with limited data support, typically representing issues raised by only a few participants. The figure below further illustrates this by highlighting examples of such codes (numbers 2 through 6), marked in pink, as seen in Figure 4.6.

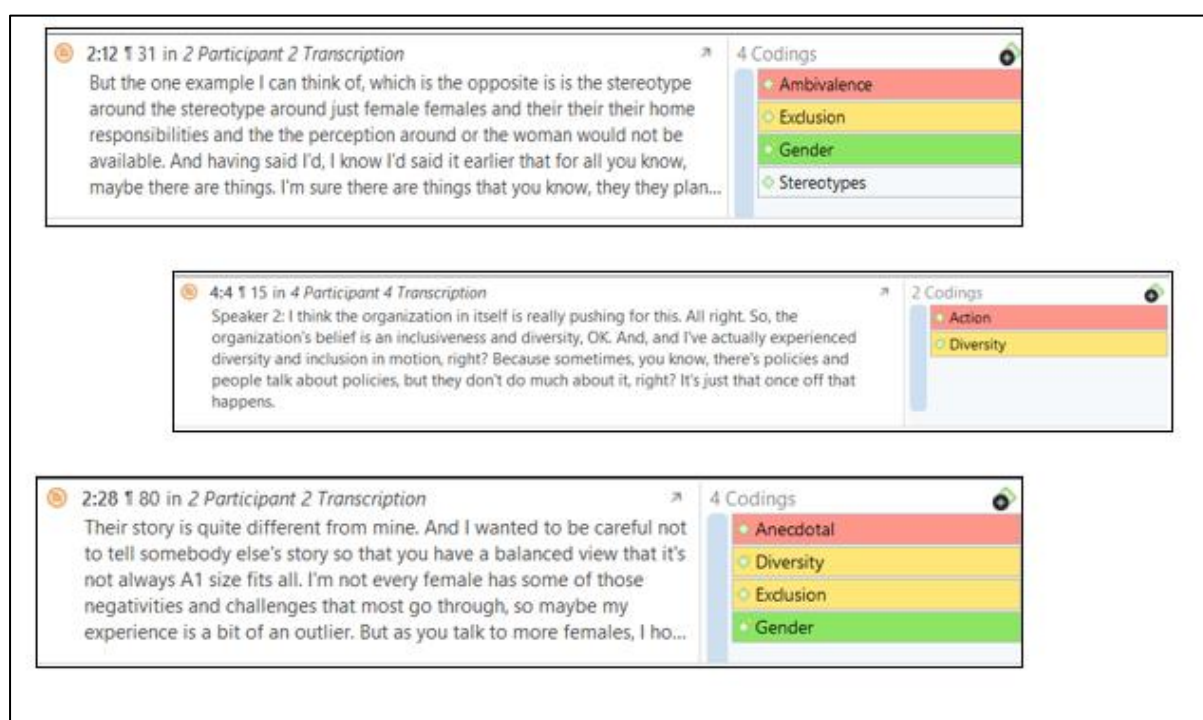


Figure 4.6: Coded examples of critical issues raised by one or very few participants

A key factor contributing to the lack of thematic coherence in the early stages of analysis was the large number of codes, many of which were applied infrequently to text segments. To address this issue, codes associated with fewer than three quotations were merged with more prominent codes. The clustering process was further supported by the software's code co-occurrence tool, which identified overlapping codes within each transcript. This feature helped reveal codes that often appeared together, suggesting potential conceptual relationships. Based on these observations, codes were either re-coded, grouped, merged, or kept separate.

Figure 4.7 provides a code co-occurrence matrix that highlights possible connections among these codes.

Search Column Codes			Efficient Talent Management	Organisa...	Co-occurrences of Efficient Talent Management a
☐	Name		55	229	
☒	Career Development	20	Efficient Talent Management	23	
☒	Diversity Policies	13	Efficient Talent Management: Advancement Opp...	1	
☒	Double Standards	2	Efficient Talent Management: Annual Review	2	1
☒	Family Responsibilities	6	Efficient Talent Management: Career Advancement	3	2
☒	Gender Barrier	58	Efficient Talent Management: Challenges	1	
☐	Glass Ceiling	1	Efficient Talent Management: Female Advancement	4	1
☐	Hiring Practices	9	Efficient Talent Management: Gender Bias	6	2
☐	Inclusive Leadership	4	Efficient Talent Management: Inclusion	6	3
Search Row Codes			Efficient Talent Management: Lack of Information	3	3
☐	Name		Efficient Talent Management: Organizational Cult...	2	2
☐	Career Development	20			

Figure 4.7: Code co-occurrence table displaying overlapping codes

The data shows that the code ‘career advancement’ co-occurred with three other codes, namely, ‘gender bias’, ‘inclusion’, and ‘organisational culture’. Similarly, the code ‘organisational culture’ was found to overlap with ‘career advancement’, ‘gender bias’, and ‘inclusion’. Additionally, the code ‘inclusion’ was found to co-occur once with ‘company policies’.

The frequency and strength of these co-occurrences are visually represented with varying colours and intensities. Notably, the code ‘inequality’, marked by number 6 and displayed in a darker shade, showed a strong co-occurrence with ‘talent management’.

This example highlights how the software aided in identifying which codes could be grouped into broader categories or provisional groups. However, decisions on clustering were not solely based on software-generated outputs. The researcher leading the analysis also manually explored patterns and relationships across the dataset, comparing the codes and their associated quotations (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

Figure 4.8 outlines the steps taken during this stage, providing additional context to clarify the analytical approach.

Search Code Groups		Search Entities			
Name		Name	Grounded	Density	Groups
Efficient Talent Management	44	Efficient Talent Manageme...	55	0	[Efficient Talent Management]
Intersectionality Impact	27	Intersectionality Impact	54	0	[Intersectionality Impact]
Organisational Culture	35	Organisational Culture Im...	229	0	[Organisational Culture]
Stereotype Impact	34	Barriers	22	1	[Organisational Culture]
Talent Management Model	42	Bias Training	1	0	[Organisational Culture]
		Career Development	20	1	[Organisational Culture]
		Diversity Policies	13	0	[Organisational Culture]
		Double Standards	2	0	[Organisational Culture]
		Family Responsibilities	6	0	[Organisational Culture]
		Gender Barrier	58	1	[Organisational Culture]
		Glass Ceiling	1	0	[Organisational Culture]

Figure 4.8: ATLAS.ti excerpt on merging and clustering similar codes

Figure 4.8 showcases eight highlighted codes grouped under the category ‘Organisational culture employed within the organisation to support the advancement of women’, with the group visually represented in orange for the analysis. The figure also highlights these codes by marking them in orange.

As shown in Figure 4.9, the codes were organised into clusters, resulting in the creation of five code groups within the software.

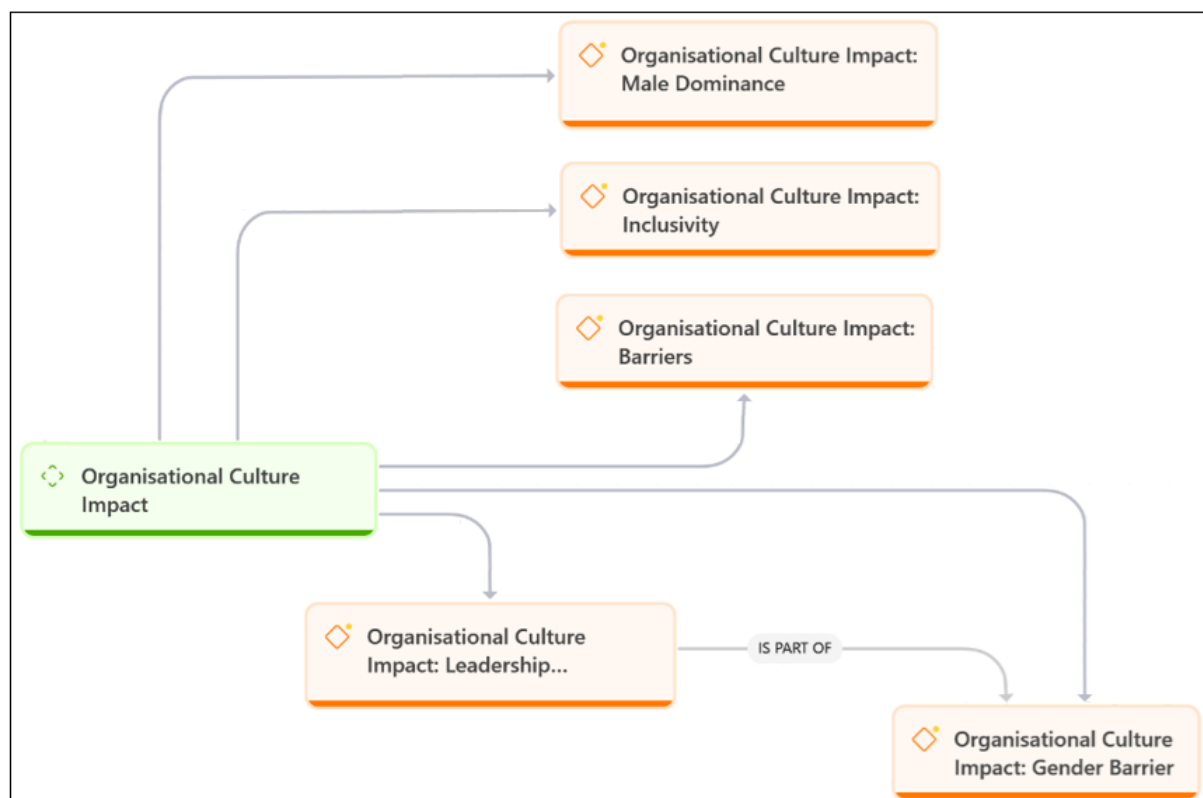


Figure 4.9: Code group: organisational culture

Figure 4.9 illustrates how five codes were grouped together to form a single code group labelled, 'Organisational culture.' After clustering the codes, they were cross-checked with the interview transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the data representation within the code group.

Table 4.4 presents an analysis of all participants' experiences, which followed a consistent approach. This approach involved examining key emerging themes to provide insight into the overall method used to systematically explore and analyse the various factors affecting the advancement of women into managerial and executive roles within the manufacturing industry.

Table 4.4: Thematic analysis for research objectives

FINDINGS MAPPED FROM RESEARCH OBJECTIVES			
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	THEME (MAIN)	KEY SUB-THEMES (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)
R01: To examine the impact of culture in the manufacturing industry on the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions.	ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE (Organisational-Level)	• Masculinised workplace culture • Gender bias in promotion and leadership allocation • Merit-based and biased advancement practices • Exclusion from strategic decision-making spaces • Limited inclusivity and representation • Barriers to growth and gender disparity	SOCIAL ROLE THEORY (Organisational-Level)
R02: To assess the impact of stereotypes about women's abilities and roles on their progression into managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry.	STEREOTYPES, IDENTITY & SELF-PERCEPTIONS (Individual-Level)	• Stereotyping and unconscious bias • Accent-based bias and racial preferences • Reduced self-confidence and visibility • Work-life balance and responsibilities • Compounding pressures • Limited leadership exposure and mentoring	SOCIAL ROLE THEORY (Individual-Level Lens)
R03: To explore talent management initiatives implemented to support the advancement of women and examine how women perceive them.	TALENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES & EFFECTIVENESS (Organisational-Level)	• Bias in recruitment and promotion systems • Unequal access to development opportunities • Limited succession planning • Limited mentoring, sponsorship and leadership initiatives • Lack of transparent performance evaluation • Limited career progression pathways	HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY (Organisational-Level Lens)
R04: To explore the influence of intersectionality (gender, race, ethnicity and other factors) on advancement opportunities.	INTERSECTIONAL FACTORS (Societal-Level)	• Patriarchal social norms • Racial and gender intersectionality • Structural inequality • Socio-economic barriers • Cultural expectations affecting advancement	INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY (Societal-Level)
R05: To examine how effective talent management practices support the advancement of women.	CONTEXTUALLY GROUNDED TALENT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK (Integrative-Level)	• Weak implementation of transformative policies • Lack of organisational accountability • Poor integration between HR systems and leadership goals	HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY (Integrative Lens)

4.8 MEASURES OF TRUSTWORTHINESS

In qualitative research, it is fundamental to ensure the trustworthiness of a study, and several components contribute to this. The researcher applied the concepts of transferability, dependability, credibility, and confirmability to establish the study's rigour (Heyvaert, Hannes & Onghena, 2017).

Transferability involves the degree to which the research findings or elements of the study can be relevant or applicable in other contexts (Tracy, 2019). It indicates that results may hold significance in settings similar to those studied (Heyvaert *et al.*, 2017). To support this, the researcher clearly identified the limitations of the study, specifying scenarios where the findings might not apply (Tracy, 2019). Furthermore, a reflective journal was kept, documenting the researcher's feelings before, during, and after interviews, as well as noting participants' reactions and responses. This practice allowed for the capture of initial impressions and insights gained throughout the interview process.

Dependability pertains to the consistency and transparency of the research process, ensuring it is logical, traceable, and well-documented (Heyvaert *et al.*, 2017). This criterion confirms that conclusions are grounded in participant data and research context, rather than influenced by researcher bias (Planing, 2014). To maintain dependability, the researcher used a semi-structured interview guide and consulted with their supervisor as needed. Detailed records were kept of any modifications to the research environment or conditions. An audit trail was also created, including notes on developing research questions, transcription challenges, and data analysis steps.

Credibility relates to the authenticity and reliability of the study's explanations, assuring that the findings truthfully reflect the data (Tracy, 2019). To minimise researcher bias, triangulation (Court, 2018; Tracy, 2019), involving three distinct data sources was employed (Yin, 2011). Firstly, the researcher spent substantial time in the field until data saturation was achieved. Secondly, interviews were conducted across three organisational levels. Thirdly, transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were carefully reviewed (Court, 2018; Yin, 2011). The researcher also engaged participants multiple times to clarify the study's purpose and their involvement (Court, 2018; Yin,

2011). Member checking was used by inviting participants to verify the study's findings (Blandford *et al.*, 2016).

An independent coder was included to provide an additional layer of review. The interviews, recorded via MS Teams, were transcribed following strict guidelines to ensure transcripts were clear, readable, and interpretable (Planing, 2014). Formatting included sufficient line spacing and margin space for annotations (Planing, 2014). The participants' reflections were also collected to enrich the findings and enhance credibility (Tracy, 2019).

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are supported by the data and can be independently verified by others through an examination of the audit trail (Heyvaert *et al.*, 2017). The researcher ensured confirmability by maintaining an audit trail using ATLAS.ti software, which improved transparency and allowed external auditors to validate the credibility of methods and procedures. Detailed records were kept of data-collection activities and interview notes (Planing, 2014).

Reflexivity denotes the process wherein researchers critically examine their own roles, assumptions, and impacts during the study process. It recognises that a researcher's history, values, and positionality can influence data collection, interpretation and analysis, especially in qualitative research (Finlay, 2002; Berger, 2015). The researcher's reflexivity inherently influenced the study process, affecting the interactions with participants, interpretation of their narratives, and construction of meaning from the data. This method improves the transparency, credibility, and ethical integrity of the study by ensuring that findings are contextualised rather than portrayed as wholly objective realities (Darawsheh, 2014).

4.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations in research are essential to protect participants, to ensure that no harm comes to them, and to establish rules for their protection and to maintain the integrity of the research process (Court, 2018).

The researcher in the current study obtained a gatekeeper's letter from the selected manufacturing industry as part of the ethical considerations and obtained permission from the University of South Africa to proceed with the study (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Tracy, 2019). A copy of the ethical clearance certificate is included as Appendix A.

4.10 Anonymity and confidentiality

The researcher took careful measures to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants throughout the study. Anonymity was maintained by keeping participants' identities hidden, while confidentiality ensured that no personal information was disclosed (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). The participants were supplied with pseudonyms, and any details that could reveal their identity were omitted (Blandford *et al.*, 2016).

The research data will be securely stored for a minimum of five years, with access limited to authorised individuals only. Electronic files are kept on a laptop secured by a password, and interview recordings are saved under fictitious names (Blandford, Furniss & Makri, 2016). Both the transcriber and the co-coder signed agreements to maintain confidentiality. After five years, all study materials both physical and digital will be permanently destroyed.

4.11 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined the methodology employed in the study to collect, analyse, and present the research findings. A feminist epistemological approach was adopted, supporting the use of qualitative research to guide the investigative process. A case analysis design was considered appropriate to meet the research objectives and address the study's research questions.

The chapter further detailed the sampling procedures, data-collection strategies, and the methods used for data analysis. Additionally, it discussed the limitations of the research design and the measures implemented to ensure the study's trustworthiness. Subsequent chapters present the case analyses and cross-case analyses derived from the research findings.

CHAPTER 5:

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1 OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

The previous chapter addressed the methodology used to explore the factors that impede women's advancement into executive managerial positions within the manufacturing industry while addressing the research objectives of the study. Chapter 5 offers a thorough summary of the themes identified from the data analysis. The primary aim of the study was to investigate the factors that impede women's progress in reaching managerial or executive positions in the manufacturing sector in South Africa, and to analyse the variations in these influencing factors in the context of cultural, systemic and organisational factors. To achieve this, the study explored the varied experiences of women based on a comparative analysis approach to identify both commonalities and disparities in the experiences and challenges faced by women striving for managerial or executive roles within the manufacturing industry. The findings were subsequently linked to the integrated theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3. This chapter combines the integrated theoretical framework established in Chapter 3 (Figure 3.3) and links the theories with the study findings (Table 4.4). The integrated framework was then refined and presented, as illustrated in Figure 6.1.

- **The first research objective**

Examine the impact of culture in the manufacturing industry on the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions. Organisational culture (Organisational level) emerged as the first main theme. The core theory linked to this theme is Social Role Theory, which serves as the primary lens explaining how gendered roles, expectations, and norms are reproduced within organisational culture and subsequently influence behaviours, decisions, and opportunities (Forgas-Coll et al. 2021). Role Incongruity Theory, Implicit Bias Theory, Glass Ceiling Theory, and Tokenism Theory function as supporting theories integrated with Social Role Theory (Zheng et al. 2018b; Lin & Li, 2025; Spearlt, 2020; Thorne, 2024). These theories explain how gendered roles, expectations, and norms become embedded within organisational culture, shaping biased practices and creating structural barriers such as the glass ceiling, exclusion from networks, and limited access to opportunities that

constrain women's leadership advancement in the South African manufacturing sector. Consequently, women's progression remains constrained despite their qualifications and merit.

- **The second research objective**

Assessed the impact of stereotypes about women's abilities and roles on their progression into managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry. Stereotypes, identity, and self-perceptions (individual-level) emerged as the second main theme. The core theory linked to this theme is Social Role Theory under the individual-level lens (Moraka, 2024). This theory explains how personal factors, including cognition, identity, beliefs, and self-efficacy, interact with social influences on shape behaviours and career outcomes. Role Incongruity Theory, Double Bind Theory, Implicit Bias Theory, and Expectation States Theory serve as supporting theories integrated with Social Role Theory under the individual-level perspective (Kabeer, Razavi & Van-der-Meulen, 2021; Bateson et al., 2007; Lienhard, 2022). These theories explain how gender stereotypes, biases, conflicting expectations, and perceived competence standards shape women's self-perceptions, confidence, career choices, visibility, and ability to navigate workplace bias and structural barriers.

- **The third research objective**

Explored talent management initiatives that have been implemented to support the advancement of women in the manufacturing industry, and to examine how women perceive them. Talent management practices and effectiveness (organisational level) emerged as the third main theme (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Kravariti et al., 2021). The core theory associated with this theme is Human Capital Theory (organisational level), which focuses on how investment in skills development and opportunities builds human capital, thereby enhancing productivity and advancement potential (Xiao, Zhao & Chan, 2024). Glass Ceiling Theory, Tokenism Theory, and Transformational Leadership Theory serve as supporting theories. These theories explain how organisational investment, or the lack thereof, in women's development, promotion, and retention contributes to capability development, improved retention, and the progression of women into leadership and executive roles (Martínez-Fierro & Sancho, 2021; Thorne, 2024; Çopani & Kola, 2023).

- **The fourth research objective**

Explored the influence of intersectionality, encompassing gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors, on the advancement opportunities for women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry. Intersectional factors (Societal level) emerged as the fourth main theme (Bauer et al., 2021; Pinem, 2023). The core theory linked to this theme is Intersectionality Theory (social lens), which explains how overlapping social identities and structural power dynamics create unique advantages and disadvantages for women (Keller et al., 2023). Feminist Theory and Social Role Theory serve as supporting theories that explain how patriarchy and intersecting identities such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity shape women's access to opportunities, expose them to systemic discrimination, and create structural barriers within South Africa's socio-economic and cultural context (Faissner et al., 2022).

- **The fifth research objective**

Examined how effective talent management practices support the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions. Efficient talent management (integrative level) emerged as the fifth main theme. The core theory linked to this theme is Human Capital Theory under an integrative lens, which explains that interconnected elements such as people, processes, policies, and organisational culture must function collectively to create sustainable change and outcomes (Yeshineh & Woldeyes, 2025). Transformational Leadership Theory and Feminist Theory serve as supporting theories (Alessa, 2021; Bodilenyane & Chinunda, 2022; Faissner et al., 2022). These theories provide a holistic perspective for designing an integrated, sustainable, and context-specific talent management framework that addresses structural, organisational, and individual barriers to women's advancement into leadership positions. The framework further emphasises equity, empowerment, and inclusive organisational change.

Table 5.1: Finding mapped from research objective

FINDINGS MAPPED FROM RESEARCH OBJECTIVES			
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	THEME (MAIN)	KEY SUB-THEMES (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)
R01: To examine the impact of culture in the manufacturing industry on the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions.	ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE (Organisational-Level)	• Masculinised workplace culture • Gender bias in promotion and leadership allocation • Merit-based and biased advancement practices • Exclusion from strategic decision-making spaces • Limited inclusivity and representation • Barriers to growth and gender disparity	SOCIAL ROLE THEORY (Organisational-Level)
R02: To assess the impact of stereotypes about women's abilities and roles on their progression into managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry.	STEREOTYPES, IDENTITY & SELF-PERCEPTIONS (Individual-Level)	• Stereotyping and unconscious bias • Accent-based bias and racial preferences • Reduced self-confidence and visibility • Work-life balance and responsibilities • Compounding pressures • Limited leadership exposure and mentoring	SOCIAL ROLE THEORY (Individual-Level Lens)
R03: To explore talent management initiatives implemented to support the advancement of women and examine how women perceive them.	TALENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES & EFFECTIVENESS (Organisational-Level)	• Bias in recruitment and promotion systems • Unequal access to development opportunities • Limited succession planning • Limited mentoring, sponsorship and leadership initiatives • Lack of transparent performance evaluation • Limited career progression pathways	HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY (Organisational-Level Lens)
R04: To explore the influence of intersectionality (gender, race, ethnicity and other factors) on advancement opportunities.	INTERSECTIONAL FACTORS (Societal-Level)	• Patriarchal social norms • Racial and gender intersectionality • Structural inequality • Socio-economic barriers • Cultural expectations affecting advancement	INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY (Societal-Level)
R05: To examine how effective talent management practices support the advancement of women.	CONTEXTUALLY GROUNDED TALENT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK (Integrative-Level)	• Weak implementation of transformative policies • Lack of organisational accountability • Poor integration between HR systems and leadership goals	HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY (Integrative Lens)

Source: Researcher's own compilation

5.2 RESULT AND DISCUSSION OF CODED SEGMENTS FOR OBJECTIVE 1

Research objective 1: To examine the impact of culture in the manufacturing industry on the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions. The themes related to research objective 1 are discussed in detail in the following sub-section with Table 5.1 highlighting the main theme and the sub-themes. Thematic analysis was conducted to explore how does organisational culture affect women's progression into managerial and executive roles within manufacturing organisations.

According to Nguyen *et al.* (2020), organisational culture plays a significant role in influencing the advancement of women to senior management roles within the manufacturing industry. This section required of the participants to reflect on how they view the current organisational culture in terms of gender inclusivity and diversity, as well as how this culture affects the progression of women into leadership positions. They also identified specific policies, practices, and cultural elements that have a notable impact on women's advancement in leadership.

Table 5.2: Thematic analysis to address Objective 1

Research Objective 1: To examine the impact of culture in the manufacturing industry on the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions.				
THEME (MAIN)	KEY SUB-THEME (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)	SUPPORTING THEORIES (INTEGRATED)	HOW THE THEORY EXPLAINS THE FINDINGS
Organisational culture (Organisational Culture)	• Masculinised workplace culture • Gender bias in promotion and leadership allocation • Merit-based and biased advancement practices • Exclusion from strategic decision-making spaces • Limited inclusivity and representation • Barriers to growth and gender disparity	SOCIAL ROLE THEORY (Organisational-Level Lens) <i>Gendered roles, expectations and norms are reproduced within organisational cultures and influence behaviour, decisions and opportunities.</i>	• Role Incongruity Theory • Implicit Bias Theory • Glass Ceiling Theory (structural barriers to advancement) <i>These theories are integrated under Social Role Theory to explain organisational culture dynamics.</i>	<i>Explains how organisational norms, values, policies and leadership practices either enable or constrain women's advancement, often reproducing gendered expectations and unequal access to resources and opportunities.</i>

The findings revealed the following main theme organisational culture (Organisational-level) and several sub-themes, including masculinised workplace culture, gender bias in promotions, and leadership allocation, merit-based and biased advancement practices, exclusion from strategic decision-making, and limited inclusivity and representation, barriers to growth and gender disparity. Social role theory was adopted as the primary theoretical lens because it explains how gendered expectations and norms are reproduced within organisational cultures and influence leadership opportunities. Supporting theories such as Role incongruity theory, Implicit Bias theory, and glass ceiling theory were integrated to strengthen the explanation of how organisational systems and practices continue to reinforce gender inequality.

When participants were invited to share their experiences with regards to the culture in the manufacturing industry concerning masculinised workplace culture, the issue of gender bias in promotion and leadership allocation and merit-based biased practices stood out as a central theme. Smith *et al.* (2019) noted that women frequently encounter systemic barriers and biases that limit their career progression, despite having qualifications equal to or exceeding those of their male peers.

5.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Masculinised workplace culture

The first sub-theme that emerged under the broader theme of organisational culture (organisational level) is the masculinised workplace culture. Despite formal policies, deep-rooted structural and cultural legacies from the apartheid era continue to affect the inclusion of women, particularly Black women, who face compounded marginalisation due to both gender and race (Woods *et al.*, 2021).

Linda explained that:

“I think in terms of the organisation's equity and inclusivity, it's possible that things may have changed in more recent times. But in the past, I was very closely aware of initiatives to bring in women and increase the bench strength of females. In this regard, I have actually witnessed positions being earmarked to hire females in the organisation.” (Linda).

This reflects an organisational intention to meet equity targets yet also points to the need for a deeper cultural shift. According to Cole and Symes (2020), the goal of gender equity efforts should not be the elevation of one gender over another, but the dismantling of unequal power structures that sustain gender-based exclusion.

Despite formal mechanisms and visible diversity initiatives, women remain under-represented in managerial and executive roles in manufacturing (Bodalina & Mestry, 2020). Another participant noted:

“From an inclusion point of view, currently I’m the only female manager. And there are things done and the way things pan out where sometimes I feel excluded just because there are only men in my team.” (Lucy).

This aligns with the findings of Ostry, Alvarez, Espinoza and Papageorgiou (2018), who argued that many organisations focus too heavily on numerical representation in leadership, without addressing the underlying cultural norms, values, and interpersonal dynamics that shape women’s day-to-day experiences in the workplace.

However, some participants did report a more inclusive experience, such as:

“From a culture point of view, the existing culture is one where anyone can grow and advance, regardless of gender. I’ve experienced personal support and encouragement to advance as a woman in the manufacturing industry.” (Linda).

This contrast in perspectives underlines a critical point: organisational culture is often unevenly experienced (Jain, 2020). While some women encounter enabling environments, others continue to face subtle or overt forms of exclusion. One participant noted:

“As a leader, there are few instances where I’ve personally felt excluded as a result of my gender. I would actually say this is one of the manufacturing industries that makes a real effort in terms of driving inclusivity. That said, I have heard from others that gender disparities do persist culturally.” (Susan).

On the other hand, another participant described more explicit forms of discrimination:

“The discrimination for women is really deep. You’re expected to do things because you’re a woman or expected not to be able to do specific things because you’re a woman.” (Susan).

Such experiences reflect what Bauer *et al.* (2021) described in feminist theory as ‘systemic gender oppression’, which is often subtle, normalised, and embedded in everyday organisational practices. Similarly, Pinem (2023) found that women in top management often face challenges rooted in unsupportive organisational cultures, including being perceived as less competent or influential than their male counterparts.

Akram *et al.* (2017) also found that women leaders frequently report a lack of trust from both superiors and subordinates, despite having the qualifications and experience required for their roles.

A participant highlighted the dynamic by explaining the ongoing gender imbalance at leadership levels:

“Despite progress, women remain under-represented in executive roles.”
(Lisa).

This observation aligns with research by Zungu and Abrahams (2020), who argued that the under-representation of women in senior roles commonly referred to as the ‘glass ceiling’ is perpetuated by a combination of structural, cultural, and attitudinal barriers. These barriers are often more difficult to address than formal discrimination, as they are embedded in informal practices and unspoken norms.

One participant provided an insightful critique of the organisation’s priorities, stating:

“I think we are more focused, and this is my personal opinion and observations, is that we are more focused to achieve a racial representative executive workforce than a gender representative workforce. I’ve been in more conversations regarding the racial profile of executives and leaders than I’ve been in regarding the gender profile.” (Kenny).

This perception reflects what Thatelo (2025) identified as intersectional inequality, where gender equity may be sidelined in favour of other forms of representational justice, such as racial equity, especially in post-apartheid South Africa. While racial transformation is critical, the sidelining of gender concerns may lead to imbalanced progress. Despite some positive changes, women in the sector continue to face challenges linked to occupational segregation, stereotyping, and limited access to networks that are often vital for promotion (Christensen *et al.*, 2020).

The UNDP (2021) highlights that, despite policy frameworks supporting gender equity, a significant gender gap remains in leadership roles within South Africa's manufacturing industry. A particularly contentious issue is the gender pay gap, often cited as a visible indicator of systemic inequality. However, in contrast to global trends, one participant contested this:

“I can tell you factually there is no gender discrimination in terms of earnings. In fact, from some data I had done, it showed that females were actually slightly

better compensated than their male counterparts. That's a big deal, because globally there has historically been a gender pay divide. So, pay-wise, I can say for a fact that this company doesn't have that issue." (Cate).

While this may reflect local progress, research suggests that structural discrimination, negotiation behaviour differences, and job-role clustering often continue to drive disparities in many organisations (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Akuffo & Kivimäki, 2020). Therefore, individual cases of pay equity may not fully reflect broader industry-wide challenges.

Reflections and Observations of a Feminist Researcher

As a feminist researcher, I observed that Linda was deeply committed to ensuring that her organisation aligned with the employment equity policies, as mandated by national legislation. She had previously led a project aimed at increasing the number of women in senior leadership positions. Linda shared that, in some cases, specific leadership roles were earmarked for women as part of this equity initiative. However, she also pointed out that even when positions were designated to improve female representation, the women still had to compete with male counterparts to secure those roles. In other words, despite being highly qualified and supported by policy frameworks, women were still expected to 'prove' themselves in an environment that inherently favoured male candidates. Linda was aligned to Peña *et al.* (2023a), who stated that public policies and legal initiatives to promote gender equality and work-life balance are generally ineffective at the executive level, focusing instead on lower organisational levels.

This observation underscores the fact that employment equity on paper does not necessarily translate into genuine inclusion in practice. Women are often forced to navigate competitive, male-dominated spaces where merit is not only contested but also filtered through a gendered lens. The culture of inclusion within management structures remains limited, and efforts toward gender equity are often undermined by the persistent expectation that women must outperform men to gain recognition or leadership opportunities.

Lucy's perspective, as the sole woman in her team, revealed the significant emotional impact of exclusion. She articulated that her thoughts are often disregarded or not given due consideration, allegedly due to her gender. Notwithstanding her

contributions, Lucy indicated her exclusion from decision-making processes, which exacerbated her sense of isolation. Her experience illustrates how women, particularly those in minority roles within teams, frequently encounter systemic and interpersonal obstacles that impede their influence and authority. Moorosi *et al.* (2018) corroborated the assertions by elucidating that racial and gender inequalities result in women from ethnic minority groups facing various challenges.

This contrast between Linda and Lucy is telling. Linda represents a woman who appears to have some institutional support and influence, at least in terms of policy enforcement. Yet even she recognises the limitations of these structures when it comes to actual empowerment. Lucy, on the other hand, represents a woman who is not supported by the system at all. Her leadership journey is marked by exclusion, emotional fatigue, and a lack of recognition highlighting the deep-rooted gender disparities that persist within the organisational leadership framework. Linda's experience is supported by Pandey *et al.* (2022), along with Few-Demo and Allen (2020), who noted that women generally encounter challenges in climbing hierarchies. Lau *et al.* (2023) found that women are exclusion from leadership roles and have fewer developmental opportunities.

As a feminist researcher, these narratives reveal a critical gap between policy and practice. While diversity and gender equity may be part of the organisational language, the lived experiences of women leaders suggest otherwise. Leadership remains shaped by a system that privileges masculine norms, undermines women's voices, and resists transformative inclusion. This reinforces the conclusion that gender representation alone is not enough, and without cultural change and institutional accountability, equity remains an illusion.

From my observation as a feminist researcher, it is evident that the representation of women in meaningful leadership roles remains profoundly limited. Women, particularly Black women, continue to be under-represented in influential and decision-making positions. This under-representation persists despite the various employment equity frameworks that are meant to address systemic inequalities.

One particular observation stood out during my engagement with the organisation: a white director, Cate, appeared to focus heavily on the organisation's racial profile at the executive level, prioritising the demographic balance between racial groups

(namely, Black, white, Indian, and Coloured employees) without paying due attention to gender disparities within those racial categories that this aligns with (Ketchiwou, 2025). Cate stated that South African women persistently face considerable obstacles in job advancement and development within the manufacturing sector. While race is indeed a critical axis of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa, the overemphasis on racial equity has inadvertently overshadowed the equally pressing issue of gender equity, especially the advancement of Black women into senior leadership roles.

The leadership structure continues to be predominantly male across all racial demographics. At the upper echelons, there is a predominance of white and Indian men, whereas Black and Coloured women are primarily situated in the lower tiers of the organisation, frequently occupying administrative or support positions. This indicates a structural deficiency as follows: the organisation has advanced in racial change but has failed to incorporate gender equity into its overarching transformation agenda. Black women, specifically, endure dual marginalisation based on race and gender. This assertion is corroborated by Posel and Casale (2019), who elucidated that gender inequality in access to education, vocational training, and employment opportunities undermines the nation's capacity to fully utilise its human capital potential.

Cate, in her capacity as Vice President, exemplifies an instance where she seems oblivious or possibly uncritical of the gendered dynamics behind workplace inequities. Due to her well-remunerated senior role, she may believe that the business has achieved adequate advancement regarding gender issues. This viewpoint is erroneous as it neglects to recognise that numerous Black women within the business, although possessing advanced academic credentials and substantial experience, continue to occupy lower-paying positions with restricted opportunities for advancement.

This sentiment aligns with the findings of Mavin and Grandy (2019a), and Karmakar (2022), who asserted that, despite possessing comparable qualifications and skills, women face numerous obstacles, including limited access to professional advancement, exclusion from powerful male networks, and persistent stereotypes regarding their work commitment in relation to domestic responsibilities.

What is most concerning is the lack of institutional awareness or urgency around pay inequality and the structural barriers that hinder women's advancement. The organisation seems content with having a few women in senior roles without interrogating how many more remain invisible at the bottom, despite their potential. The symbolic inclusion of a few women does not equate to systemic transformation.

Lanier *et al.* (2022) asserted that transformational leadership enhances team engagement and endorsement of diversity programmes, illustrating the significant impact of leadership style on inclusion objectives, which I, as a feminist researcher, find profoundly concerning. Gender equity must be deliberately and completely addressed at all organisational levels, rather than being relegated to an afterthought within the framework of racial transformation. Institutions must understand the intersections of race and gender and adopt targeted measures to raise Black women into leadership roles, assure equal compensation, and foster inclusive decision-making environments.

5.2.2 Sub-theme 2: Gender bias in promotion and leadership allocation

The second sub-theme that emerged under the broader theme of organisational culture (meso-level) is the gender bias in promotion and leadership allocation, particularly in male-dominated industries like manufacturing. One participant highlighted the stark gender disparity, especially at lower operational levels, stating:

"There are very few women in general, you'd have a distribution of around 90% male and 10% female, particularly from a shop floor perspective in maintenance. You have very few. All the companies that I've worked in have shown the same distribution." (James).

This observation is consistent with research by Gursoy & Maier (2023), found that male-dominated fields often sustain structural segregation, where women are clustered in entry-level or administrative roles and remain under-represented in decision-making positions. A 'leaky pipeline' effect is often observed, where women may enter the industry in relatively equal numbers at the graduate level, but their progression through the organisational ranks diminishes over time.

Another participant echoed this view, noting:

"I had a lot of conversations with graduates and trainees, and they all say it looks very hard to get to the point of senior manager. You see a lot more

women at the lower-level graduates, operators, supervisors but as you go up within the structure, there are fewer. The conversations I always have with my fellow female colleagues suggest that at some point in the process; it becomes harder for them.” (Cynthia).

This aligns with the findings of Martinez-Feirro and Sancho (2021), who asserted that organisational structures in male-dominated industries create invisible ceilings that slow or block women's advancement. These ceilings are often reinforced by unspoken norms, power dynamics, and expectations around leadership behaviour and identity. Additionally, one participant pointed out the role of organisational culture in influencing which person advances:

“Our culture is driven by our principles being never satisfied and always needing more, having healthy conflict and healthy tension. If someone is not comfortable in those kinds of environments, whether it's male or female, then you're going to struggle. I think, generally, most males are more comfortable in conflict environments than females.” (Cate).

This insight touches on a broader theme in leadership and gender literature: the perception that leadership success is often tied to traditionally masculine traits such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and conflict tolerance (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Murray, 2014; Bruckmüller & Braun, 2020; Jun *et al.*, 2022). Such environments can implicitly disadvantage women, who may be socialised or expected to exhibit more collaborative or empathetic styles (Hoyt & Simon, 2016). When these leadership traits are misaligned with organisational culture, women may find it difficult to navigate, adapt to, or advance within such environments.

Furthermore, Ridgeway (2011) argued that these structural and cultural norms are not just passive obstacles but actively shape the perceptions of competence and leadership potential, often to the detriment of women. In male-dominated fields, leadership pathways are often built on networks, mentorship, and visibility, all of which can be harder for women to access due to under-representation and gendered stereotypes.

Reflections and Observations of a Feminist Researcher

In reflecting on the gender bias in promotion and leadership allocation in male-dominated industries, one of the participants shared a wealth of experience drawn from several manufacturing sectors beyond the organisation under study. He noted a

consistent pattern across industries: top management remains overwhelmingly male at approximately 90%, with women representing a mere 10%. He highlighted that most female employees tend to be concentrated on the shop floor, especially among the so-called 'green horns or entry-level roles. This pattern, he said, was disheartening, as it indicated that women, despite entering the field in significant numbers, are seldom represented at decision-making levels.

Cynthia, another participant, reiterated this worry by noting that the majority of women enter the profession at the graduate level, usually assigned to junior roles with the assurance of mentorship and prospective advancement. Nonetheless, as they strive to advance in the hierarchy, their visibility and representation markedly decline. She narrated a discussion with a female coworker who expressed the challenges women face in attaining senior management or director-level positions. Notwithstanding their education, experience, and ongoing self-improvement, women, especially Black women, encounter stagnation in mid-level positions, unable to penetrate the structural barrier.

Cynthia's sentiments underscore the perspective articulated by Browne and Misra (2003), Mavin and Grandy (2019a), and Karmakar (2022) that, despite possessing comparable qualifications and skills, women face numerous obstacles, including limited access to professional advancement, exclusion from powerful male networks, and persistent stereotypes regarding their work commitment in relation to domestic responsibilities.

As a Black feminist scholar, these observations are profoundly concerning. Women are investing in their education and talents while exhibiting competence and dedication in subordinate positions. Nevertheless, the system persistently fails to reciprocate that investment with upward mobility. Consequently, individuals are confined to subordinate positions, while leadership trajectories are structured to favour men disproportionately. This assertion was corroborated by the World Economic Forum (2022), Cahn (2020), Hubbard (2021), Hyken (2019), and Catalyst (2021), which indicates that the intertwined systems of race, gender, class, and history persist in restricting access to leadership roles and influencing societal power dynamics.

Cate, a senior executive, offered another dimension to this issue by suggesting that one of the barriers for women at executive levels is the presence of conflict. She

explained that leadership at the top is often characterised by power struggles, intense decision-making, and confrontation. According to her, many women are not comfortable in such conflict-driven environments, which becomes a limiting factor in their advancement. This points to a broader and problematic assumption that leadership success is inherently tied to traditionally masculine traits aggression, dominance, and a 'fighting spirit'.

This perception reinforces the gender stereotypes that disqualify women from leadership roles, not on the basis of capability but based on their presumed emotional disposition or leadership style. It creates an environment where women must either conform to hyper-masculine norms to be taken seriously or risk being excluded for not being 'tough enough'.

Pandey *et al.* (2022), along with Few-Demo and Allen (2020), noted that women generally encounter challenges in climbing corporate hierarchies. Overall, the interview data reflected the following troubling, gendered dynamic: women enter with potential, education, and promise, but face a system that slowly filters them out. These insights underscore how structural hierarchies, gendered leadership expectations, and cultural biases intersect to uphold male dominance in leadership, leaving Black women excluded from the very roles they are qualified to occupy.

5.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Merit-based biased practices

The third sub-theme that emerged under organisational culture (meso-level) was the merit-based biased advancement practices, which were closely linked to the existing organisational culture. Stichter and Parpart (2019a) argued that fostering values of equal opportunity can help minimise perceived gender disparities, especially in areas involving strategic alignment and traditionally undervalued 'soft' functions. Meritocracy was viewed as a fair approach to evaluate and advance all employees equally, a perspective reflected in the following statement by Ben:

"I believe meritocracy should take precedence above all else. As a senior leader in the organisation, I see immense value in ensuring gender diversity at the leadership level. It's something I consider essential. Having a mix of genders at the senior table brings diverse perspectives and enriches decision-making." (Ben).

This view aligns with the findings of Ross *et al.* (2018) who suggested that integrating diverse perspectives at leadership levels leads to better decision-making and fosters a more inclusive organisational culture. Furthermore, various scholars, such as Lyness and Grotto (2018), Heilman (1983), and Heilman *et al.* (2024) supported the idea that gender diversity in leadership positions contributes to improved organisational performance and decision-making capabilities.

Linda supported the above view by saying:

“I still believe meritocracy is paramount. In my current area, I’ve observed a promising pipeline of emerging female talent within the younger management levels, which is very encouraging to see.” (Linda).

This observation is consistent with recent findings by Madsen and Desai (2017), who argued that merit-based systems can create more opportunities for women, especially when leadership recognises and nurtures female talent at lower management levels. However, the transition to senior management roles remains challenging for many women, which is discussed further by Andreoni & Tregenna, 2020; Chatterjee & Deacon, 2022, who emphasised the need for more supportive frameworks for female leadership development.

Furthermore, Tony expanded on this by adding:

“So, what that means for us is that yes, if we had a woman with a 71 versus a man with 72 points, we could argue that $\pm 1\%$ is not tangible enough and place the female.” (Tony).

This aligns with the concept of ‘gender balancing’ discussed by Schein (2001), which suggests that, in cases of close merit discrepancies, organisations can make deliberate efforts to place women in leadership roles to counteract historical gender imbalances. According to Mavin (2016), subtle bias and organisational culture often influence these decisions, making gender balance in leadership not only a matter of fairness but also a strategic organisational goal.

Reflections and Observations of a Feminist Researcher

During the interviews, the participants raised critical concerns about the notion of meritocracy within their organisations, particularly in male-dominated sectors. One participant emphasised that career advancement should be based on merit above all else, while another elaborated on a scenario where, if a female candidate scored 71

points compared to a male candidate's 70, the woman should rightfully secure the position. However, what emerged from deeper reflection was a troubling undercurrent: the idea that women are often perceived as being 'done a favour' when they are selected, even when they meet or exceed the criteria.

According to Dickens, Hall and Watkins (2020), Black women, especially those in professions like manufacturing, frequently endure heightened tokenism that takes the form of gendered racism, which forces them to change their identities as a coping strategy in generally restrictive settings. As a feminist researcher, I was struck by how this framing diminishes women's achievements and reinforces the narrative that women, particularly Black women, are not appointed based on capability but on tokenism. This results in women continually being managed in marginalised roles and denied the positions they deserve. Merit, in these contexts, becomes a subjective measure easily influenced by the emotional biases and social power of those in decision-making roles.

The participants highlighted that in performance evaluations, line managers, often white males, hold significant power. If such a manager harbours discomfort with advocating for or defending the promotion of a Black woman, she is unlikely to advance, regardless of her actual performance. In these instances, the concept of meritocracy is manipulated to preserve the status quo, where white male dominance in leadership remains unchallenged.

This system of gatekeeping disproportionately affects Black women, who find themselves judged by inconsistent standards and excluded from meaningful career progression. What is masked as objective assessment is often laden with racial and gendered biases. The structural design of performance appraisals and promotion processes, therefore, does not merely assess merit it reproduces existing hierarchies and subtly sidelines those who are already marginalised. In a male-dominated industry, this reinforces a cycle where Black women are rarely seen, heard, or promoted into the roles they have rightfully earned.

5.2.4 Sub-theme 4: Exclusion from strategic decision-making spaces

The fourth sub-theme that emerged under organisational culture (organisational-level) was the exclusion from strategic decision-making spaces which refers to the institutionalised practices, systemic biases, and cultural norms that disproportionately

disadvantage. (Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). This exclusion may manifest inadvertently through biases and entrenched structural disparities: As noted by the participant named Lucy:

“From an inclusion point of view currently I’m the only female senior manager there and there’s some things, where sometimes I feel like I’m excluded by virtue of there’s just men there. They don’t understand from my point of view I think from a culture point of view, that’s probably the one place where I’d feel like there’s a bit of a gap in fully feeling included.” (Lucy).

This feeling of exclusion is often linked to what Ibarra *et al.* (2018) referred to as the ‘authority gap’, the tendency to perceive women, even when equally qualified, as less competent or legitimate leaders. This results in microaggressions, reduced access to influential networks, and limited advocacy, ultimately undermining women’s confidence and slowing their advancement (Kanter, 1977; Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011).

A key mechanism through which exclusion operates is performance bias, which is the systematic distortion of how individuals’ work and potential are evaluated. As described by (Cardon & Arwine, 2023) women and other under-represented groups are more likely to be judged based on subjective traits such as ‘emotionality’ or ‘likability’, while men are typically assessed on competence and leadership potential.

Ben echoed these concerns by noting:

“From my experience, I don’t think any of our policies is detrimental. To be honest, that in my view from a culture point of view.” (Ben).

This view highlights a perception that while formal discrimination may no longer be embedded in policy, the cultural and structural limitations on gender equity still linger, often unchallenged.

Jackson and Fransman (2018) critiqued many corporate gender equity initiatives, particularly development programmes aimed at women, as often being superficial or lacking real impact. These initiatives may raise awareness but fail to translate into measurable progress at the senior management level. As Nisha explained:

“I think there’s a lot more opportunity to have more tools and around that talent management space, especially for women and to help to develop and grow women as well. Mentorship is a very big one for me... a formal mentorship programme that brings women and pairs them with mentors who can guide them through the journey of their career.” (Nisha).

This observation highlights the lack of structured support mechanisms, such as formal mentorship, which are essential in counteracting systemic biases and nurturing female leadership. Stichter and Parpart (2019b) argued that embedding equal opportunity values into strategic planning and moving beyond traditional 'soft' diversity initiatives can help reduce gender-based perceptions and barriers. However, implementation remains inconsistent.

Joseph noted the limited scope of government-driven policies in their practical application as follows:

"Talking about policies, so I'm sure even the government has put this policy about female representation... and then that's done so that policy plays a role."
(Joseph).

Yet, another participant cautioned that these interventions often plateau at the managerial level and rarely extend to executive roles:

"It plays a role up to a certain level... up to managerial level, which is good. But I'm not sure if there are policies beyond that. I've worked for 5-6 different companies, and that is always the case. Companies take long to entrench the concept of female upliftment, not to executive level. So, you almost get the feeling that if it wasn't for a government push, you wouldn't have any company implementing anything to improve female representation." (James).

This comment underscores the reactive nature of many corporate responses to gender equity, where policy implementation is driven by compliance rather than commitment. Bonvillain's (2020) assertion is thereby validated: unless both institutional culture and policy enforcement are addressed in tandem, progress will remain incremental and surface-level.

Research by McKinsey & Company (2023) further highlighted how feedback disparities hinder women's progression. Women are less likely than men to receive clear, actionable feedback, making it more difficult for them to improve performance and secure promotions. Additionally, feedback to women often focuses more on personal attributes ('being more confident') rather than task-related performance, which may diminish developmental value (Correll & Simard, 2016). The cumulative effect of these biases creates a glass labyrinth rather than a glass ceiling, where women encounter subtle, compounding barriers at every stage of career advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Reflections and Observations of a Feminist Researcher

From my observation as a feminist researcher, Lucy's experience powerfully illustrates the ongoing exclusion of women, particularly Black women, from meaningful participation in leadership spaces. Lucy was the only Black woman in a senior leadership role within her department, yet she was consistently sidelined when it came to decision-making processes and strategic discussions. Her emotional account highlighted how deeply undervalued she felt by her male colleagues, who not only occupied most of the senior positions but also often disregarded her input. Despite her qualifications, competence, and leadership role, Lucy's contributions were frequently overlooked. Her ideas were rarely taken seriously, and she often felt isolated at the leadership table. This left her questioning her own value and sense of belonging, despite having earned her position through merit and hard work.

What is particularly disturbing is how exclusion in these spaces can lead to a perception often unspoken but deeply felt that a woman's presence in leadership is conditional on flawless performance. Any mistake or challenge is quickly interpreted as proof that she does not belong.

Lucy's case exemplifies how representation alone is not enough. Simply placing women, especially Black women, in leadership positions does not guarantee inclusion or influence. Without structural and cultural changes, women remain tokenised; present in the room but silenced in voice. Their presence becomes symbolic rather than substantive.

This observation reinforces a painful reality: when women finally reach senior leadership roles, they are not always welcomed as equal contributors. Instead, they are often expected to prove themselves constantly, navigate exclusion, and endure subtle, yet persistent forms of undermining. For Lucy, the experience was not just professional, it was deeply personal and emotionally taxing.

As a feminist researcher, I assert that genuine gender equity in leadership must transcend mere numerical representation. It necessitates the transformation of organisational cultures to appreciate, honour, and incorporate women's voices, viewpoints, and leadership styles. Representation should be coupled with substantive participation, psychological safety, and a dedication to dismantling the prevailing patriarchal norms that pervade numerous leadership contexts.

This assertion is supported by Gangwani *et al.* (2019), Koka *et al.* (2021), and Schumacher *et al.* (2021), who indicated that even in the presence of formal gender equity policies, covert practices and ingrained biases persistently hinder the advancement of women.

As a feminist researcher, I found it deeply disappointing to observe that some senior leaders and directors within the organisation were largely unaware of the gender equity policies already in place; policies designed to support the advancement and development of women in the workplace. This lack of awareness is not only disheartening but also indicative of a broader issue, namely, the disconnect between policy and practice in male-dominated industries. Despite clear legislative frameworks from the South African government such as the Employment Equity Act and broader gender transformation mandates, many of the leaders interviewed could not articulate how these policies are being implemented within their organisations. This ignorance reflects a concerning level of detachment and passivity, especially among those in positions of power who are responsible for driving transformation.

Nisha, a senior Indian woman leader, emphasised that while policies are in place, significant progress is still required. She explicitly observed that talent management, succession planning, and organised mentorship programmes are domains where advancement is sluggish. She asserted that mentorship is crucial for equipping and placing women for senior leadership, yet it is not being consistently prioritised or resourced.

Nisha's perspectives are corroborated by Booysen and Nkomo (2014) and Simmons and Yawson (2022b), who indicated that women are often excluded from essential opportunities, including leadership development, mentorship programmes, and strategic assignments vital for professional advancement. Likewise, James, a senior Black male manager, distinguished himself as one of the rare executives who possessed both expertise in the government's gender equity policies and a fervent commitment to their implementation. He recognised that although the policies promote representation and gender equality, organisations frequently require an inordinate amount of time to assimilate and execute these directives. He believes that while numerous enterprises ostensibly endorse female empowerment, their actual devotion is feeble, erratic, or confronted with opposition.

This dissent is very alarming. It suggests that some organisational leaders are either hesitant or unwilling to translate gender equity policies into actionable activities. Without leadership commitment, policy is only symbolic rather than revolutionary. It exists solely in documents rather than being incorporated into the organisation's culture, recruitment, and promotion practices.

These assertions align with the perspectives articulated by Mahbub (2020) and Aleksandra *et al.* (2015), who emphasised that transparent, gender-neutral selection protocols are crucial in the recruitment process to guarantee equity. It is especially concerning that if leaders do not understand or prioritise the policies, they will be unable to effectively communicate these values to their teams or meaningfully influence the company culture. This sentiment is consistent with the findings of Ibarra *et al.* (2010) and Lee (2022), which indicated that women, often excluded from these networks, encounter challenges in obtaining essential mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership positions.

This fundamentally indicates that women, particularly Black women, will continue to be marginalised, regardless of the ostensible progressiveness of the policies. James' insights underscore this truth. He noted that in the absence of top-down gender transformation and integration into leadership perspectives, organisations will remain male-dominated, leading to the failure to achieve gender equity targets. His apprehension was clear: if leaders do not understand the policies and fail to acknowledge their importance, no transformation will take place.

From a feminist research perspective, this observation reveals that policy implementation is not merely a procedural task, it is a cultural and political act. It requires informed, committed, and gender-conscious leadership. Leaders must go beyond compliance and develop a genuine understanding of how systemic inequality operates and what must be done to dismantle it.

Unless executives assume responsibility for gender transition policies, and diligently incorporate them into company strategy, women will persistently encounter obstacles to advancement. The mere existence of a policy does not guarantee advancement; it is the determination and consciousness of leaders that dictate whether those policies realise their intended effects. Researchers, such as Acker (1990) and Correll *et al.* (2020), advocated for the reassessment of organisational norms and the

implementation of specific policies to rectify systemic imbalances and guarantee equitable access to opportunities.

5.2.5 Sub-theme 5: Limited inclusivity and representation

The fifth sub-theme that emerged was the limited inclusivity and representation, particularly for women in the manufacturing industry.

This was echoed by a participant, who stated:

“There is a bit of a barrier for women progressing in this space, particularly in manufacturing. I've spoken to other female colleagues who look at me and say it's amazing that I'm a senior manager, because for many it feels almost impossible to get here.” (Betty).

This experience reflects broader national trends. Although Moorosi *et al.* (2018) found that income inequality in South Africa is slowly declining, significant disparities remain, especially in male-dominated industries like manufacturing. Research by Mwale and Dodo (2017) supported this, attributing the slow progression of women in managerial roles to a range of systemic barriers including, socio-cultural norms and gender expectations (Ilesanmi, 2018a), organisational structures that perpetuate inequality (Lau *et al.* 2023), restrictive laws and outdated policies (UNESCO, 2017), gender-based stereotypes, and unconscious biases.

5.2.6 Sub-theme 6: Barriers to growth and gender disparity

These barriers affect women, regardless of their qualifications or experience. Another participant elaborated:

“Some women I work with feel it's incredibly hard to advance in this industry. They see me as a role model, but they're also very aware of the sacrifices I had to make to get here. There were definitely barriers I had to push through, and often that meant compromising on personal or family priorities. I've been in this industry for seven years, and every step came with its own challenges.” (Lisa).

This sentiment reflects the findings by Eagly and Carli (2007) that career progression for women often involves navigating a ‘labyrinth’ of obstacles rather than a straightforward path. Additionally, Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) highlighted that women in leadership face unique hurdles, such as exclusion from informal networks, lack of mentorship, and performance evaluation bias.

The unequal expectations placed on women, such as assumptions about emotionality or a lack of decisiveness, also play a role. Cardon and Arwine (2023) stated that men are often assessed based on their potential, while women are judged more harshly on past performance and personality traits. McKinsey & Company (2023) further noted that women tend to receive less actionable feedback compared to men, hindering their growth and preparedness for senior roles.

Despite these avenues for growth, many women still encounter persistent structural and cultural barriers that impede their advancement. The 'glass ceiling' metaphor aptly describes these invisible but real impediments that prevent women and minorities from attaining senior leadership roles. Research by Bahn *et al.* (2020) emphasised that women are often overlooked during the first step up to management positions, creating a 'broken rung' that leads to cumulative disadvantages in career advancement.

Reflections and Observations of a Feminist Researcher

As a feminist researcher, I found Betty's account deeply revealing of the structural and psychological barriers that continue to hinder women's progression in male-dominated industries such as tourism. Betty highlighted how the organisational environment, along with subtle cultural messages, has created a space where women not only face external resistance but also internal doubt about their place in top leadership. This self-doubt, as she explained, is not rooted in personal inadequacy, but rather in the broader gendered expectations that shape how leadership is perceived and enacted.

Gürsoy & Maier (2023) and Musetsho *et al.* (2021) stated that the persistence of gendered expectations within familial roles for numerous African and Indian women, resulted in the acceptance of work intrusions into their personal life, and underscored their restricted coping options for stress.

The opinion expressed by Betty's colleagues, who doubted how she attained her position, underscores the enduring assumption that leadership is predominantly a domain for men. Women are frequently anticipated to exhibit power in manners that replicate masculine leadership ideals, thereby establishing a restrictive and limited archetype of an ideal leader.

This opinion resonates with Barker's (2012) assertion that an androcentric culture elevates the male and masculine perspective as the norm, thereby perpetuating the oppression of women, some males, and other marginalised groups. Androcentrism is

a foundational notion in feminist philosophy (Jones, 2000; Clifford, 2002; Jaffe, 2010). The implication is unequivocal: for a woman to be regarded as a credible leader, she must exhibit not only competence but also the type of resilience that corresponds with traditionally masculine attributes such as decisiveness, authority, and emotional restraint. This assertion is consistent with the perspectives of Ely *et al.* (2011) and Morley (2013), who argued that historical and cultural biases often favour masculine leadership and performance standards.

This perception is particularly damaging at lower levels of the organisation, where women who aspire to leadership roles are discouraged by what they see at the top. Rather than feeling inspired, many feel disillusioned, as the role models ahead of them appear exhausted, emotionally strained, and isolated. The leadership journey, rather than being aspirational, seems unattainable or even undesirable.

Lisa, a Black woman in a senior leadership role, offered a deeply emotional reflection on her experience. She is seen as a role model by other women in the organisation, yet her success has come at a high personal cost. She spoke candidly about the sacrifices she has had to make, for example, being constantly available, working beyond regular hours, and placing organisational needs above her own family and personal priorities. Her journey illustrates the gendered cost of leadership, particularly for Black women, where the demand to prove one's worth often requires the abandonment of other essential aspects of life. This raises a critical feminist question: Must women sacrifice their identity, time, and personal wellbeing to be considered suitable for leadership? If leadership requires women to compromise who they are to constantly perform strength, suppress vulnerability, and stretch themselves to meet unrealistic expectations, then the system is inherently unjust.

From my observation, it is evident that the organisational culture has not yet evolved to accommodate diverse leadership styles, nor has it embraced a model of leadership that supports work-life balance, emotional wellbeing, or gender-inclusive practices, as stated by Pena *et al.* (2023), that providing female employees with flexible work arrangements is not a luxury but a necessity to retain their talent. Brega *et al.* (2023) stated that organisations that provide flexible work options tend to have higher levels of gender inclusion and retain more women in leadership roles.

Instead, it reinforces the notion that only those willing to conform to rigid, masculine norms are fit to lead. These insights demonstrate that women's under-representation in leadership is not simply a pipeline issue it is also a reflection of an organisational culture that fails to value different forms of leadership and demands emotional and personal sacrifices from women that are rarely expected of men. Until this changes, leadership will continue to be a contested and costly space for many women.

5.3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS OF THE CODED SEGMENTS FOR OBJECTIVE 2

Research objective 2: To assess the impact of stereotypes about women's abilities and roles on their progression into managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry. The themes related to research objective 2 are explored in detail in the following sub-section, with Table 5.3 highlighting the central theme. A thematic analysis was conducted to examine how do stereotypes, identity, and self-perceptions shape women's leadership advancement within the manufacturing sector.

The participants reflected on their personal experiences or observations of such stereotypes including how these biases may have impacted their career progression, influenced workplace dynamics or decision-making, and the presence of any organisational efforts aimed at addressing or countering these stereotypes.

Table 5.3: Thematic analysis to address Objective 2

Research Objective 2: To assess the impact of stereotypes about women's abilities and roles on their progression into managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry.				
THEME (MAIN)	KEY SUB-THEME (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)	SUPPORTING THEORIES (INTEGRATED)	HOW THE THEORY EXPLAINS THE FINDINGS
Stereotypes, identity & self-perceptions (Individual-Level)	• Stereotyping and unconscious bias • Accent-based bias • Reduced self-confidence and visibility • Work-family conflict • Caregiving pressures • Limited leadership exposure and mentoring	SOCIAL ROLE THEORY (Individual-Level Lens) <i>Personal factors (cognition, identity, beliefs and self-efficacy) interact with social influences to shape behaviours and career outcomes.</i>	• Role Incongruity • Double Bind Theory • Implicit Bias Theory • Expectation States Theory <i>These theories are integrated under Social Cognitive Theory to explain how mindsets and perceptions influence women's leadership journeys.</i>	<i>Explains how stereotypes, identity and self-beliefs influence women's confidence, career choices, visibility and ability to navigate bias and structural barriers in the workplace.</i>

The findings revealed the main theme which is stereotypes, identity and self-perception and the following sub theme such as stereotyping and unconscious bias, accent-based bias, reduced self-confidence, work-family conflict, caregiving pressures, and limited mentoring opportunities. Social role theory was adopted as the primary theoretical lens because it explains how personal beliefs, self-efficacy, and workplace experiences shape behaviour and career outcomes. Supporting theories such as Role incongruity theory, Double bind theory, Implicit Bias theory, and Expectation states theory were integrated to explain how stereotypes and social expectations influence women's confidence, visibility, and leadership progression.

5.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Stereotyping and unconscious bias

The first sub-theme that emerged under stereotypes, identity and perception was the Stereotyping and unconscious bias. Stereotypes significantly contribute to the persistent gender imbalance in the manufacturing industry, often dissuading women from considering it a viable career option (Navarro-Astor *et al.*, 2017). The lived experiences of Lucy underscore these findings when she reflected:

"Being the only woman in a room full of men used to place a heavy burden on me. It influenced how I carried myself from the way I walked and talked to feeling pressure to stay silent unless addressed. The environment made it difficult to express myself freely." (Lucy).

Another participant, Susan, described a transformative shift in workplace dynamics:

"Our team was challenged to rethink the traditional setup and asked, 'Why not have a processing department made up mostly of women?' Historically, these roles were male-dominated, but eventually, we reached a point where about 70–80% of the team were women. This shift reflects a real effort in the industry to challenge outdated thinking and embrace diversity." (Susan).

These testimonies highlight both the challenges and the progress being made in redefining gender roles within male-dominated industries. There is a growing recognition that diversity fosters more innovative and effective outcomes than homogenous teams.

It is crucial to investigate gender stereotypes and their influence on career choices to address systemic barriers. Cultural associations between leadership and traditionally masculine traits, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and aggressiveness, further

exacerbate gender disparities in the workplace (Gursoy & Maier, 2023). Research indicates that women are more likely than men to conform to gender stereotypes, often perceiving themselves as less assertive and competent, while men are typically rated lower on stereotypical dimensions (Hentschel *et al.*, 2019).

This lack of continued support leads many women to withdraw from leadership pathways due to increased stress, isolation, and the absence of institutional backing.

Nancy reflected as follows on this shift:

"Sometimes, women are given support at the beginning, but as they move up, the help fades away. You start feeling like you're on your own the higher you go. Some of us choose less demanding roles just to cope with the stress and lack of support." (Nancy).

This phenomenon is further complicated by the perception that male colleagues become less collaborative when women reach senior positions. There is often an unspoken expectation that once a woman has 'made it,' she should no longer need help. Lisa remarked:

"There's this attitude like 'if you've come this far, you should be able to manage on your own.' And some men actually become more hostile or distant, like you're not supposed to ask for help anymore." (Lisa.)

Understanding employee perceptions of female leadership is therefore crucial in challenging these entrenched attitudes. According to Folbre (2019), a necessary step in addressing inequality is to evaluate through a gender lens how leadership styles are perceived. While women are often associated with nurturing, collaborative, or transformational leadership approaches (Cho *et al.*, 2024), these associations can also reinforce stereotypes. As Kaufman and Lindquist (2018) argued, leadership style should not be presumed based on gender; instead, it should be recognised as an expression of individual personality, skills, and contextual demands.

In industries such as manufacturing, biases are often entrenched in hiring, promotions, performance reviews, and everyday interactions, resulting in unequal treatment and fewer opportunities for under-represented groups (Bain & Company, 2021).

"In my leadership journey, I have participated in several courses and workshops focusing on the importance of diversity and inclusion." (Ben).

These learning experiences have played a key role in shaping a leadership style that embraces and supports diverse perspectives in the workplace. Emily highlighted the persistent gender bias in senior roles:

“Even at senior levels, gender bias is noticeable men are often favoured or taken more seriously, while women are expected to justify themselves. When a man expresses anger, it's often seen as making a valid point, but when a woman does the same, it's dismissed as her being emotional.” (Emily).

This finding aligns with the broader research on gender bias, where men are often perceived as more assertive or competent, while women face higher scrutiny and are unfairly labelled as emotional when expressing similar behaviours (Rosenstein & Rosenstein, 2024a). In male-dominated sectors such as manufacturing, these ingrained biases create additional barriers to career advancement for women (Bahn *et al.*, 2020).

Cultural perceptions and societal biases regarding women's roles significantly influence decisions about whether women pursue or avoid leadership positions (Smith *et al.*, 2019). Lisa reflected on their growing awareness of unconscious bias and its impact:

“I've come to understand that unconscious bias is real and can significantly affect how women perceive themselves and their work environment. This made me more mindful of my own actions and more observant of those around me like peers who might unknowingly perpetuate bias. It's important to recognise these moments and address them, even if the person isn't aware, because that's the nature of unconscious bias.” (Lisa).

The presence of unconscious biases, particularly in ethnically diverse teams, can lead to miscommunication, partiality, and exclusion, hindering collaboration and innovation (Schnierle *et al.*, 2019). These biases, whether conscious or unconscious, significantly affect career progression, especially for women, even when they possess equal or superior qualifications. These biases create systemic obstacles that impede women's access to leadership roles and reduce overall diversity and inclusion efforts within organisations (Meidert *et al.*, 2023).

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

As a feminist researcher, I have noted an increasing inclination among certain male leaders to enhance their comprehension of diversity and inclusion. One of the

participants, Bernard, demonstrated a noteworthy eagerness to participate in diversity and inclusion programmes. His objective is to expand his awareness and cultivate mindfulness regarding unconscious biases, particularly those prevalent in male-dominated sectors.

Rosenstein and Rosenstein (2024b) emphasised that, while contradicting an individual's expressed beliefs, these unconscious biases can profoundly affect judgement, decision-making, and interpersonal interactions. Bernard concurred and explained that it signifies a vital advancement in recognising that both implicit and explicit gender bias persistently influences workplace dynamics. According to Greenwald *et al.* (2022), implicit biases are mental associations that, when activated by demographic traits, can indirectly affect judgement and behaviour without conscious awareness.

Emily, a Caucasian female and senior leader inside the organisation, emphasised a pervasive gendered double standard regarding the display of professional emotions. She noted that when men exhibit rage or assertiveness, they are frequently regarded as credible and perceived as strong or authoritative. Conversely, when women articulate comparable sentiments, they are often disregarded, misinterpreted, or categorised as emotional or unprofessional. This disparity promotes a gender stereotype that reinforces male supremacy in leadership while penalising women for exhibiting the same attributes. Emily's perspective resonates with those of Alder *et al.* (2022) and Comin *et al.* (2021), which emphasised that implicit biases often contribute to the belief that men are intrinsically more competent or possess superior leadership traits.

As a feminist researcher, a recurring observation that emerged during engagements with women in leadership is the inconsistent and conditional nature of support provided to women across various stages of their careers. The participants expressed that while women often receive encouragement and guidance at the early stages of their career journeys, particularly as they begin navigating management roles, this support tends to diminish drastically as they ascend into senior leadership positions. One poignant example came from Lisa, a Black woman in a senior executive role. She reflected on how the environment around her shifted significantly after attaining a high-level position. According to Lisa, there is a prevailing perception that once a woman reaches a senior level, she no longer needs assistance. This 'you've made it, now you can

handle it' mentality creates a false assumption of invulnerability. Instead of being supported, women are expected to constantly prove themselves and bear the full weight of the leadership role, often without the collegial backing that their male counterparts receive.

Even more concerning is Lisa's observation that male colleagues can become distant or even hostile once a woman rises to a position of influence. This is deeply troubling, as it implies that male peers may view the advancement of women as a threat to their dominance within the corporate hierarchy. Lisa's experience reveals a silent but significant dynamic of competition and resistance that manifests as withdrawal of support or subtle sabotage. These behaviours, whether conscious or unconscious, result in emotional strain and professional isolation for women leaders. From a feminist standpoint, this illustrates the deeply embedded patriarchal structures that shape organisational culture. The narrative that 'support ends at the top' reflects a belief that leadership is inherently masculine, and women must prove their worth continuously, unlike their male peers, who are often assumed to be competent by default.

Lisa, a Black woman in a senior position, noted the existence of unconscious bias within the sector. She has grown increasingly cognisant of both her own internalised biases and those of her colleagues. Her increasing awareness is significant, as it indicates a transformation in understanding the subtle yet persistent nature of unconscious prejudice in the workplace. Such prejudices frequently show in decision-making, development prospects, and the perception of women's achievements relative to those of their male colleagues. Cuberes and Teignier (2016), Moro, Moslehi and Tanaka (2017), Olivetti (2014), Ngai and Petrongolo (2017), and Rendall (2018) underscored the existence of enduring implicit biases and inequitable power dynamics in decision-making processes.

It is essential to identify and confront unconscious bias in efforts to eliminate the systemic inequities that women persistently encounter. Although raising awareness is crucial, it is inadequate by itself. To this end, the organisation has initiated training to educate male staff about unconscious bias (Okpokwasili & Dukor, 2023; Abalkhail, 2020). These endeavours are both commendable and essential. Nonetheless, more extensive and enduring therapies are necessary. Training should be accompanied by accountability frameworks and quantifiable results to guarantee that behavioural change ensues from awareness.

Unconscious bias transcends individual perception, revealing profound structural difficulties that disproportionately affect women, particularly in male-dominated settings (Gangwani *et al.*, 2019; Koka *et al.*, 2021; Schumacher *et al.*, 2021). As stated by feminist researchers, genuine transformation necessitates transcending mere awareness to adopt inclusive leadership approaches that confront gender conventions, redefine professionalism, and foster equitable decision-making.

As a feminist researcher, one of the most distressing observations I encountered relates to the pervasive gender stereotypes that continue to shape and constrain women's experiences in male-dominated industries. Mariscal *et al.* (2019) stated that this well-documented phenomenon reinforces the notion that leadership is primarily a male trait, deterring women from seeking leadership roles and undermining their authority. These stereotypes are not merely external perceptions they are internalised by women who must navigate complex and often hostile organisational environments that reward masculine conformity and penalise expressions of femininity. Hentschel *et al.* (2019), and Larsson and Alvinus (2020) further described how internalised bias might cause women to doubt their skills, potentially leading to a cycle of underperformance and under-representation.

For instance, one participant, Lucy, spoke of the unrelenting pressure to suppress her authentic self in order to be taken seriously. The workplace culture implicitly demanded that she adopt a more 'masculine' presence by walking, speaking, and even dressing in ways that aligned with dominant male norms. Lucy's views aligns with that of Zheng *et al.* (2018a), who explained that in role incongruity theory, when people's social roles deviate from society norms or stereotypes related to their positions, they encounter internal and external conflicts. This burden was emotionally taxing and psychologically disorienting (Kasakowska-Berezecka *et al.*, 2022). It forced Lucy to compromise elements of her identity, reinforcing the notion that professionalism is inherently male, and that success for women depends on their ability to assimilate into masculine behavioural codes.

From my feminist perspective, this points to a form of gendered cultural assimilation, where women are expected to adjust themselves to fit into pre-existing male-centric norms, rather than the organisation evolving to accommodate and value diverse expressions of leadership.

Various researchers (Heilman, 1983; Lyness & Grotto, 2018; Heilman *et al.*, 2024) explained that it draws attention to the ways in which this discrepancy hinders women's job progression by encouraging stereotyped assessments that have a detrimental effect on their prospects and performance perceptions. The invisibility of femininity as a legitimate leadership trait continues to marginalise women and limits the diversity of leadership styles in the workplace.

On a different but related note, Susan, another participant, described her experience in transforming operational processes within her department to become more inclusive and effective. However, despite her success at the operational level, she emphasised that women, especially Black women, continue to be under-represented and face significant barriers at senior levels. This is an indication of the glass cliff phenomenon, where women may be given operational responsibilities or temporary leadership during times of crisis, but remain excluded from long-term, strategic decision-making roles.

5.3.2 Sub-theme 2: Accent-based bias and racial preferences

The second sub-theme that emerged under stereotypes, identity and perception was the accent-based bias and racial preferences. Gender stereotypes continue to significantly affect women's career advancement, particularly within male-dominated industries like manufacturing. These stereotypes contribute to the gender imbalance by discouraging women from pursuing manufacturing as a viable career option (O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021; Kasakowska-Berezecka *et al.*, 2022). Joseph shared his experience, highlighting the subtle yet powerful expectations placed on women, especially in global companies:

“In manufacturing companies, especially those with headquarters in Europe or America, there can be unspoken expectations around appearance and how one speaks particularly for women. There’s a perception that to progress or be promoted, especially as a woman, you need to look a certain way and speak in a manner associated with Model C schools. This creates challenges related to diversity and inclusivity in career advancement.” (Joseph).

This reflection underscores the impact of racial and linguistic biases on professional credibility and belonging. Such discriminatory norms align with the findings of Cross *et al.* (2023), which highlighted how subtle forms of exclusion disproportionately affect employees of colour.

According to Ardener *et al.* (2021), gender stereotypes create deep-rooted biases about women's capabilities in roles traditionally held by men. These stereotypes not only shape perceptions but also lead to penalties and increased scrutiny for women who succeed. Emily explained:

"There's a persistent stereotype that women are less available or committed to work due to their home and family responsibilities. This perception can negatively impact their access to opportunities and career progression." (Emily).

These insights reveal how assumptions about women's familial roles continue to shape decisions in the workplace, often resulting in exclusion from advancement opportunities. Similarly, Kare highlighted how motherhood introduces additional layers of bias:

"There's a common stereotype in the workplace that women who are pregnant or returning from maternity leave are not interested in career advancement. Decisions are often made based on assumptions rather than actually asking the woman about her interest or availability. As a result, opportunities may be withheld, reinforcing biases and limiting women's progression based on their parental status." (Cate).

This aligns with research from Gursoy & Maier (2023), which emphasised that women, especially Black and Asian women, face systemic barriers to leadership, regardless of their qualifications. Furthermore, hiring practices can reflect implicit biases favouring candidates who mirror the racial or cultural background of hiring managers (Campbell, 2024). These insights were echoed by Lucy:

"Gender bias is evident even at senior levels, where men are often favoured and taken more seriously without needing to justify themselves. Emotional expression is interpreted differently based on gender when men get angry, it's seen as assertiveness or having a valid point, but when women express anger, it's dismissed as being emotional or unprofessional. This double standard creates an uneven playing field in the workplace." (Lucy).

In addition to these external perceptions, internalised stereotypes also play a role. Hentschel *et al.* (2019) found that women are more likely than men to describe themselves as less assertive and competent, a dynamic that can further hinder their confidence in leadership environments.

Finally, the complex intersection between career aspirations and caregiving responsibilities was a recurring concern:

“In the workplace, mothers, especially new ones, often carry more home and caregiving responsibilities than their male counterparts, even when married. While this is sometimes acknowledged without negative intent, it still impacts their careers, as these added responsibilities can influence perceptions of availability and commitment, ultimately affecting advancement opportunities.”
(Nancy).

As Cross *et al.* (2023) argued, the under-representation of women in leadership is not only a matter of equality but a challenge that has implications for economic progress. Gender stereotypes, compounded by organisational culture, limit women’s access to senior roles. This is further reinforced by the findings from Ketchiwou (2025), which revealed that even at the entry- and mid-levels, women are promoted less frequently than men.

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

As a feminist scholar, I found Joseph's discoveries particularly unsettling, as they exposed the enduring presence of racialised and gendered stereotypes inside corporate leadership cultures. Joseph noted that Black and Indian women frequently face the expectation to ‘sound British’ or conform to white cultural standards to be deemed competent or professional. This expectation, grounded in racial and class prejudice, underscores a more profound issue: the closer a woman's speech or behaviour conforms to white, middle-class standards, the greater her likelihood of being accepted into elite leadership roles. The issue transcends mere skill or competence; it pertains to adherence to a prevailing norm.

This perspective is consistent with the findings of Triana *et al.* (2023), who asserted that the theoretical framework initially proposed by Eagly and Karau in 2002 indicated that bias against female leaders arises from a perceived incongruity between the attributes required for leadership roles and the societal expectations of women.

My interviews and observations revealed that the limited number of women in top positions frequently displayed these ‘acceptable’ characteristics, particularly in their communication and presentation styles. This underscores the notion that, for advancement, women, especially women of colour, must eliminate facets of their

identity to conform to a leadership archetype established by and for white men. This is consistent with Moorosi *et al.* (2018), who asserted that racial and gender prejudices result in women from ethnic minority groups facing various challenges.

Emily, another participant, highlighted the ongoing stereotypes about women and their availability. She noted that societal assumptions around women's roles in the family, particularly regarding childcare and home responsibilities, continue to negatively influence how women are perceived in the workplace. These outdated beliefs limit women's access to leadership opportunities and career advancement, implying that family obligations make them less dedicated or less capable.

Kare, a Black woman in a senior position, made a particularly disturbing comment regarding maternity leave. She suggested that once a woman becomes pregnant and goes on maternity leave, it is assumed she is no longer interested in career progression. This notion that motherhood diminishes a woman's professional value is deeply rooted in patriarchal thinking. It sends a message that women's reproductive roles are incompatible with leadership, as if giving birth reduces one's competence or ambition. This mindset reinforces the structural exclusion of women from meaningful career advancement.

Lucy, another participant, provided compelling evidence of how gender bias operates in leadership. She observed that emotional expression is judged very differently depending on gender. If a man displays anger, it is often seen as a demonstration of strength or assertiveness. However, when a woman expresses emotion, especially frustration or passion, it is often dismissed as weakness or unprofessionalism. Lucy emphasised that this double standard discourages women from expressing themselves authentically, and reinforces the belief that leadership is inherently masculine.

In her own experience, Lucy also reflected on the burden of caregiving. As is often the case, women disproportionately carry caregiving responsibilities, whether for children, elderly family members, or others. This labour, while invaluable to families and society, is frequently treated as an inconvenience in the workplace. It places women at a disadvantage, as they are perceived as less available, less flexible, and less committed, even when they are outperforming their peers.

Lindsay echoed these sentiments, stating that women are “welcome to care, but not to lead”. Her words highlight how gender norms continue to shape who is seen as fit for leadership, and who is relegated to supportive or secondary roles. Despite qualifications, experience, and proven performance, women are still held back by institutionalised bias, while men continue to benefit from a system that was designed with their identities and needs at its centre.

From a feminist standpoint, it is evident that the leadership frameworks in these sectors are profoundly patriarchal and restrictive. These obstacles are both individual and societal. They are ingrained in corporate culture, decision-making processes, and preconceptions regarding gender, race, and leadership. Bagdogan (2021) asserted that women are disproportionately under-represented in senior management and executive director roles due to systemic and individual obstacles.

The organisation must more deliberately align with the principles established in government employment equity policies and the intersectional approach, which, although not consistently articulated in contemporary feminist terminology, still addresses the varied oppressions faced by women in South Africa (Rego, 2023). It must transcend superficial diversity and address the ingrained biases that persistently disadvantage women, particularly women of colour. Genuine reform can transpire only when leadership paradigms broaden to incorporate multiple perspectives and recognise that women can lead, excel, and flourish without emulating or conforming to antiquated, male-centric standards.

5.3.3 Sub-theme 3: Reduced self-confidence and visibility

The third sub-theme that emerged under stereotypes, identity and perception was that of reduced self-confidence and visibility. Organisational decision-making is often influenced by deeply embedded stereotypes and cultural norms (Heilman, 1983; Lyness & Grotto, 2018; Heilman *et al.*, 2024). As men typically dominate senior roles, they tend to receive more institutional support, which unintentionally sidelines women and restricts their access to leadership opportunities. Charles recognised this pattern but also highlighted meaningful progress:

“There has been a positive shift in many companies towards promoting women, particularly Black South African women, into management positions. In some cases, women even make up the majority of managers or hold a 50/50

split with men. This reflects a growing recognition of the value that competent, hardworking women bring to leadership roles and a deliberate effort to drive transformation and inclusion.” (Charles).

Cultural expectations and gender roles, which vary across countries and communities, strongly influence how labour is divided and how leadership is perceived. As Dirisu *et al.* (2018) and Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) explained, societal beliefs often shape perceptions of women’s skills and preferences, reinforcing the idea that women are more suited to caregiving or support roles rather than leadership. These assumptions can lead to systemic exclusion and create additional hurdles for women as they navigate their careers.

Richard echoed these findings as follows:

“In the current organisation, there is a clear and commendable effort to promote gender diversity, even in traditionally male-dominated areas like engineering and other technical departments. This shows a commitment to breaking historical patterns and creating more inclusive workplaces.” (Richard).

Donald elaborated on proactive steps being taken at the departmental level:

“Engineering remains a male-dominated field, but there are now intentional efforts, especially from HR, to prioritise gender equity by reserving certain trainee positions for women. In departments where gender representation is imbalanced, measures are being put in place to ensure female inclusion is non-negotiable. While some areas still need progress, others are showing genuine inclusivity.” (Donald).

These reflections underscore how cultural shifts both within society and organisations can challenge long-standing gender biases and open pathways for women’s advancement.

The persistent under-representation of women in managerial and executive roles is often attributed to the ‘glass ceiling’ a metaphor for the invisible yet powerful barriers that inhibit women’s upward mobility in organisational hierarchies (Zungu & Abrahams, 2020).

Donald, with long-standing experience within a male-dominated organisation, provided a candid reflection on this phenomenon:

“I’ve been with this company for 15 years, and it has traditionally been very male dominated. There’s definitely been a glass ceiling one that even affects some men. If you weren’t part of the inner circle, moving into senior leadership was extremely difficult. Things have improved over time, though the system is still far from perfect.” (Donald).

This narrative highlights a critical dimension of the glass ceiling: its exclusivity is not only gender-based but also shaped by informal power networks and organisational politics. Those outside of these networks, regardless of gender, often face restricted access to leadership opportunities. Nevertheless, women tend to be disproportionately affected due to historical marginalisation and fewer opportunities to build influential alliances within senior leadership circles (Pena *et al.*, 2023). James stated that:

“Ultimately, overcoming the glass ceiling requires more than policy changes it necessitates a cultural shift that normalises women's leadership, values diverse perspectives, and actively disrupts gendered expectations of competence and authority.” (James).

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

In the interviews, an Indian male participant, Charles, emphasised a significant positive change in certain companies regarding gender equity. He recognised that some companies, especially those external to his own, have made significant advancements in promoting woman representation in technical fields. He provided instances in which engineering departments have attained, or are striving for a 50/50 gender balance, a significant advancement towards inclusivity in a traditionally male-dominated discipline. Charles exhibited an understanding of industry-wide evolution and a recognition of organisations spearheading this shift.

Charles’ observation supported that of Alessa (2021), who asserted that the theoretical paradigm emphasises the leader's role in motivating and fostering followers to achieve higher levels of morality and commitment, hence, enabling significant organisational transformation. Moreover, Çopani and Kola (2023) elucidated transformational leadership by emphasising its profound impact on followers, cultivating loyalty, commitment, and reverence for their leader.

Richard, another participant, built on this by affirming the importance of promoting women across all racial groups, including Black, Coloured, and Indian women into executive and leadership positions. His insights reflect a growing understanding

among some male leaders that gender diversity is essential, not only for ethical and social reasons but also for business performance and innovation. Richard's views were commendable, as they acknowledged both the moral imperative and the strategic value of gender inclusion at senior levels.

Donald added further insight, noting that Human Resources (HR) departments are beginning to prioritise gender equity, especially in sectors like engineering. He described how HR policies are starting to address the imbalance, aiming to create a more inclusive pipeline for leadership roles.

However, despite these promising developments, my observations on the interviews indicate that progress remains uneven, especially within the manufacturing industry. While gender representation may be improving at entry and mid-level roles, particularly in technical areas such as shop-floor operations, women continue to be under-represented at senior and executive levels. The engineering function, within the manufacturing industry in particular, remains heavily male-dominated. Women who do enter these departments often find themselves concentrated at the operational level, rather than in decision-making or strategic leadership roles.

A recurring theme from the interviews was the need for women to continuously prove their competence. Unlike their male counterparts, women, especially those in engineering and technical departments, must often go above and beyond to demonstrate that they are capable of performing the same tasks. This culture of heightened scrutiny creates additional pressure on women and reinforces the perception that leadership in technical fields is inherently masculine.

The current structure of the manufacturing organisation, as focus of the study, still upholds traditional gender hierarchies. Despite some departments advocating for gender equity, there remains a cultural resistance within core operational areas. Women's advancement is slowed, not due to a lack of talent or education, but because of persistent biases that question their technical credibility and leadership potential.

As a feminist researcher, my observation of Donald's and James's reflections provides further evidence of the systemic and structural barriers that continue to hinder women's career progression in male-dominated industries. Donald, who has over 15 years of experience within the same organisation, described the entrenched gendered culture of exclusion that permeates the leadership structure. He noted that the

organisation has traditionally been male-dominated, and although there have been efforts toward transformation, a glass ceiling still visibly exists limiting the advancement of women and, to some extent, men who do not align with dominant leadership cliques.

Huaman-Morillo *et al.* (2024) explained that the glass ceiling notion has expanded to include a variety of related metaphors, such as 'sticky floors', 'labyrinths', and 'glass walls', each of which highlights unique aspects of gendered organisational systems that hinder professional advancement.

Donald emphasised that moving into senior leadership roles within the organisation is not purely based on merit or potential. Advancement often requires being 'known' or part of a specific informal leadership network, which provides the necessary visibility and internal sponsorship. Donald's views align with that of Singh and Malhotra (2017), that claimed that the ceiling acts as a barrier to upward mobility, with the term 'glass' representing impenetrable obstacles (Prasad, 2018). This insider culture effectively excludes those, especially women and marginalised groups, who are outside these networks. Without such connections or active inclusion in strategic leadership circles, there is "no road forward", as Donald described it.

James, another senior professional, reinforced these observations but also provided a more policy-driven perspective. He highlighted that the transformation of leadership spaces in South Africa requires more than the existence of employment equity policies; it demands a cultural and organisational shift that actively normalises women in leadership. James noted that while the South African government has implemented robust policies, including the Employment Equity Act, many organisations fail to translate these mandates into tangible outcomes.

From a feminist perspective, this observation underlines the intersection of culture, power, and policy implementation. While policy is a critical enabler, it must be accompanied by organisational will, leadership accountability, and a deliberate shift in culture. The continued existence of informal power structures, and the 'who you know' dynamics, serves to reinforce existing hierarchies and gatekeeping practices that systematically disadvantage women

5.3.4 Sub-theme 4: Work-family conflict

The fourth sub-theme that emerged under stereotypes, identity and perception was the work-family conflict. According to Pedersen *et al.* (2023), work-life balance involves maintaining a sustainable distribution of time and energy between work demands and personal or family life. This balance is vital for preventing burnout, reducing stress, and promoting well-being. Cynthia noted:

"One of the biggest challenges is the perception that executive roles require long hours and constant availability, which can be daunting, especially for individuals balancing other responsibilities." (Cynthia).

Adekoya *et al.* (2024), also highlighted that *family responsibilities* which include caregiving for children, siblings, or aging parents can significantly limit women's time, energy, and commitment to their professional roles. Kare shared that:

"Many women face additional family responsibilities caring for siblings, children, or aging parents, which can limit their career mobility. They often choose to stay in more stable roles to support their families or partners, even when they have the potential for executive positions. In contrast, men are generally less likely to factor in these family obligations when making career decisions." (Kare).

Bay (2019) concurred, arguing that many women in leadership either remain childless or rely on full-time support systems such as partners or nannies. This trend reflects not personal choice, but rather the failure of organisations to implement transformative and inclusive workplace policies. Emily reinforced this perspective by stating:

"Women often face the societal expectation of being primary caregivers, which limits their flexibility at work. While men can stay late or travel for work without question, women are expected to manage household and childcare duties." (Emily).

This imbalance perpetuates structural barriers, where men are assumed to be more available and therefore better suited for demanding leadership roles. Ross *et al.* (2018) further emphasised that many women take career breaks or reduce their working hours due to family demands, which translates into fewer years of work experience and reduced competitiveness for senior roles.

The impact of rigid workplace structures on gender disparity was also highlighted in studies by Wallen (2002), Piterman (2008), and Vandello *et al.* (2013), who found that

inflexible working hours are a key factor in the attrition of female talent from leadership pipelines. Conversely, Rowe *et al.* (2023) found that implementing flexible work arrangements significantly improves women's engagement and retention.

Zamarro and Prados (2021) argued that expectations for employees to work late into the evening inherently disadvantage women, especially mothers who must balance professional responsibilities with childcare, including school pickups and homework support. This creates unequal advancement opportunities for women.

Nisha reflected on the psychological pressures of being the only woman in a male-dominated environment:

"There was a time when I was often the only woman in a room full of men, and that in itself carried a heavy psychological burden. It influenced everything from how I walked and talked to whether I felt I could speak up. The pressure to conform was intense." (Nisha).

These evolving dynamics highlight the potential impact of intentional inclusion strategies but also underscores the need for sustained cultural and structural change to fully address the limitations placed on women by family responsibilities and caregiver expectations.

Work-life balance refers to the ability to effectively manage professional commitments alongside personal life, including time for family, self-care, and leisure activities. As one participant explained, achieving this balance is essential for maintaining both productivity and personal well-being. According to Pedersen *et al.* (2023), maintaining this equilibrium helps reduce stress, prevent burnout, and enhance overall health and job satisfaction, factors crucial to sustained career growth and mental resilience.

Ross *et al.* (2018) emphasised that these responsibilities frequently result in women taking career breaks, working part-time, or taking leave when their children are unwell. Such interruptions lead to fewer cumulative years of experience compared to male peers. Consequently, when senior leadership positions become available, women are often at a competitive disadvantage not due to lack of capability, but due to systemic structural barriers tied to caregiving expectations and workplace inflexibility.

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

As a feminist researcher, I have noted enduring gendered stereotypes in male-dominated sectors, especially concerning women's availability and appropriateness for executive positions. A prominent misconception expressed during the interviews is the perception that a mother will be unavailable for last-minute tasks, urgent travel, or extended work hours. This view perpetuates the marginalisation of women and positions caregiving as antithetical to leadership. The findings by Cardon and Arwine (2023) indicated that women in leadership positions are perpetually subjected to elevated performance expectations compared to their male counterparts.

Emily, a top leader, noted that societal norms continuously designate women as the principal carers. Consequently, women are frequently regarded as less dedicated or accessible for positions that require travel, extended hours, or adaptable schedules. Emily's sentiments correspond with those of Hsieh *et al.* (2019), who addressed social perceptions regarding women's restricted geographic mobility, frequently associated with familial and caring responsibilities. Moreover, Taylor-Abdulai *et al.* (2014) noted that women throughout Africa disproportionately bear unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Conversely, men are never scrutinised for working late or travelling much. This double standard perpetuates structural inequities and limits women's access to leadership possibilities.

Nisha recounted her experience as the sole woman at high-level meetings, characterising it as mentally burdensome and isolating. Her story underscores the emotional weight that women frequently bear when manoeuvring through male-dominated leadership environments. These criteria disproportionately harm women with caring responsibilities (Dziuba *et al.*, 2020). The obligation to perpetually demonstrate competence, alongside external caring duties, establishes an inequitable environment for female professionals.

Studies conducted by Herrendorf *et al.* (2014; Porzio *et al.* (2022) demonstrated that gendered societal norms devalue occupations often linked to women, including caregiving. These entrenched gendered assumptions are not only discriminatory but also perpetuate a male-dominated leadership framework. Lee (2022) elucidated that women often encounter societal constraints that restrict them to caregiving and household roles. The notion that executive positions necessitate the forfeiture of

personal and familial life precludes a substantial number of capable and qualified women from progression. According to Campbell *et al.* (2020), this unpaid employment is both undervalued and normalised within society, perpetuating the notion that a woman's principal function is domestic work.

In my opinion, as a feminist researcher, leadership should not be synonymous with fatigue, neglect of home life, or constant availability. Organisations need to rigorously reassess their definitions of leadership and success, recognising work-life balance as a crucial facilitator rather than an impediment. Angayarkanni *et al.* (2024) asserted that it is crucial to promote a work-life balance to retain female talent. Organisations must establish policies that promote equitable chances for all employees, irrespective of gender, including providing flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and caregiving assistance.

However, Peña *et al.* (2023a) asserted that public policies and legal activities aimed at promoting gender equality and work-life balance are typically ineffective at the executive level, concentrating instead on lower organisational tiers. Leadership positions have to be attainable without necessitating that women forsake their own identities or home responsibilities.

5.3.5 Sub-theme 5: Caregiving pressures

The fifth sub-theme that emerged under stereotypes, identity and perception was the Caregiving pressures. Family responsibilities not only influence women's availability but also shape how their career trajectories are perceived. The participants in this study expressed concern over persistent biases in managerial hiring decisions. Lisa, for example, shared:

“In the manufacturing industry, where I have over a decade of experience, there’s often a tendency to justify why women shouldn’t be promoted to certain positions. At the managerial level, many of these biases and stereotypes are well-known such as the assumption that if you hire a woman, she might go on maternity leave within a year.” (Lisa).

This sentiment echoes the findings of Pedersen *et al.* (2023), who highlighted how motherhood triggers biased assumptions about women's long-term commitment and capacity to lead.

Betty added:

“There's a common excuse used in hiring decisions people assume that hiring a man is a safer option because he won't take maternity leave and is seen as more likely to stay long-term.” (Betty).

These perceptions contribute to the under-representation of women in leadership and perpetuate the ‘motherhood penalty’ a term coined to describe the disadvantages working mothers face in terms of pay, advancement, and perceived competence (Aide et al. 2022)

In certain disciplines, high-pressure roles such as plant manager or general manager are still viewed through a gendered lens. Donald noted:

“There's a belief that these positions should be filled by men due to the perception that women may 'crack' under pressure.” (Donald).

These stereotypes reflect long-standing biases that equate leadership toughness with masculinity and overlook the diverse leadership styles women bring to the table (Curini et al., 2023).

Additionally, the expectation that women should carry most caregiving responsibilities remains a significant barrier to their career growth. Zamarro and Prados (2021) argued that childcare demands and rigid work schedules often hinder women from pursuing senior roles. Supporting this, Ashley observed:

“At work, men often show little empathy toward pregnant women, expecting them to continue working without accommodation even though many have had pregnant partners themselves.” (Ashley).

This illustrates how even shared life experiences do not always translate into equitable support in professional settings.

Family responsibilities not only influence women's availability but also shape how their career trajectories are perceived. Verick (2018) noted that the burden of unpaid care work is a major driver of women's exit from the workforce. Ardener et al. (2021) attributed this to deeply rooted gendered cultural expectations, which frame caregiving as a woman's primary role. These societal norms discourage women from pursuing leadership and reinforce the belief that their careers are secondary.

Ross et al. (2018) further explained that caregiving duties, such as taking time off to care for children or sick relatives, often interrupt women's careers, leaving them with fewer years of uninterrupted work experience than men. This creates an uneven

playing field when opportunities for advancement arise. Similarly, Sowjanya *et al.* (2017) contended that patriarchal family structures discourage the deviation from traditional roles, making it more difficult for women to prioritise career aspirations over caregiving.

Despite these challenges, Kare expressed optimism and noted:

“While becoming a mother does shift priorities, it also brings a broader, more well-rounded perspective. Mothers often gain a deeper sense of responsibility and balance, which can enhance their contributions in the workplace.” (Kare).

This aligns with findings by Rowe *et al.* (2023), who suggested that caregiving experiences can positively shape leadership qualities, such as empathy, time management, and resilience, traits that are highly valuable in senior positions.

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

As a feminist researcher, I have observed the troubling assumptions and expectations placed on women, particularly mothers, within the leadership pipeline of the organisation. One recurring bias is the belief that hiring a man is a safer or more stable option than hiring a woman, particularly one of childbearing age. The assumption is often that women will eventually go on maternity leave or shift their priorities toward family responsibilities, and therefore, pose a ‘risk’ to operational continuity.

This belief is not only discriminatory, but fundamentally flawed. It undermines women’s competence, commitment, and leadership potential simply based on their gender and reproductive role. There is also a damaging perception that women are more likely to ‘crack under pressure,’ especially during pregnancy or early motherhood. Such views perpetuate a culture of doubt and reinforce the exclusion of women from meaningful leadership opportunities.

Several participants echoed this sentiment. Kare, for instance, shared her experience of being a mother in the workplace. While she acknowledged that motherhood brought her a richer, more grounded perspective, she also revealed that it drastically changed how she was perceived by her colleagues. Instead of being seen as an asset with a broadened worldview, her identity as a mother became a source of scrutiny, forcing her, like many others, to constantly prove her worth and ability to lead. Another participant, Ashley, noted the lack of empathy shown toward women who are pregnant or managing caregiving responsibilities. She highlighted that colleagues, especially

male counterparts, often disregard the emotional, physical, and logistical realities of motherhood. Women are expected to maintain the same performance standards without acknowledgment of the unique challenges they face, while men in similar family situations are rarely held to the same level of expectation or scrutiny.

This persistent maternal bias reveals a systemic failure in recognising that caregiving and leadership are not mutually exclusive. Women who become mothers do not lose their capabilities, ambition, or professional value. Yet, the culture in some organisational spaces continues to treat them as if they do, and subject them to repeated tests of commitment and competence. This added burden is emotionally exhausting and professionally unfair. It is deeply disappointing that such attitudes still exist, especially when many of the male leaders enforcing them are parents themselves. They fail to extend the same understanding and flexibility to their female colleagues that they would likely expect for themselves or their own partners.

In light of these findings, it is imperative that organisations move beyond superficial diversity goals and begin to implement policies and practices that actively support working mothers. This includes flexible work arrangements and parental leave policies that do not penalise career progression, leadership development programmes that accommodate and affirm women during and after maternity, awareness training that addresses unconscious bias around motherhood and caregiving.

Motherhood should not be treated as a professional liability. Instead, organisations should value the resilience, adaptability, and insight that mothers bring to leadership roles. Women should not have to 'prove themselves' repeatedly to justify their place in executive spaces. They are already qualified, already competent, and already deserving of the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

5.3.6 Sub-theme 6: Limited leadership exposure and mentoring

The sixth sub-theme that emerged under stereotypes, identity and perception was the limited leadership exposure and mentoring. Through providing coaching and constructive feedback, leaders improve team performance and help individuals realise their full potential.

One participant highlighted the organisational commitment to development, stating:

"Whether you're male or female, if you identify a course that can enhance your leadership abilities or prepare you for a managerial or executive role, the company will support you financially to pursue it. They've really invested in supporting growth and development. Also, because of the size of the company, there's a lot of mobility. For example, if I joined as a 20-year-old female trainee in engineering, and later developed an interest in quality, I could move into that area. From there, I could shift into production. It's very flexible. That level of exposure across multiple departments, like 7 or 8 different areas, really helps you decide where your true passion lies and where you want to grow. So yes, there's definitely a strong culture of development here." (Richard).

Richard's observation highlighted the existence of developmental pathways and structured rotations available to young professionals, particularly in engineering. He emphasised that early career exposure to multiple operational areas is intended to broaden an individual's understanding of the business. While this may appear beneficial in theory, from a feminist standpoint, I have critical concerns about how such practices actually unfold in gendered ways, especially for women.

Developing a clear vision and strategy is a fundamental responsibility of a leader. To ensure organisational progress, leaders must set clear goals and align corporate initiatives. They chart the course, communicate objectives effectively, and craft a strategic plan that guides the organisation (Copani & Kola, 2023). In addition to these strategic tasks, leaders play a crucial role in team management and employee development by offering career advancement opportunities, coaching employees, and fostering a culture of continuous learning (Vinh *et al.*, 2022).

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

From my observation, the movement of female engineers from one department to another often resembles horizontal shifting, rather than strategic upward mobility. Women are circulated across departments, ostensibly to gain experience, but rarely do these movements translate into real leadership opportunities or promotions. This raises the question: When does lateral movement convert into upward movement? A more specific question may be: Why does the pipeline for upward leadership development appear to stall for women?

To me, the message being reinforced is that women are 'collecting experiences' without being positioned to use them to advance. This creates the illusion of

development, while avoiding the discomfort of elevating women into decision-making roles. As a feminist researcher, this pattern reflects a structural issue that the organisation may be using horizontal mobility as a placeholder rather than a bridge to leadership, especially for female employees.

There is a critical difference between development and displacement. Moving from 'area to area' or 'site to site' without a clear upward trajectory can be demotivating and exploitative. It sends a message that the organisation values women for operational flexibility rather than strategic capability.

Furthermore, this framework fails to address the power dynamics and gatekeeping behaviours that exist at higher leadership levels where real authority is held and where women continue to be vastly under-represented. Without clear milestones, mentoring, sponsorship, and promotion criteria, these horizontal experiences remain unstructured, unsupported, and unacknowledged when it comes time for leadership consideration.

5.4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS OF CODED SEGMENTS FOR OBJECTIVE 3

Research objective 3: To explore talent management initiatives that have been implemented to support the advancement of women in the manufacturing industry, and to examine how women perceive them. The themes related to research objective 3 are discussed in the sub-section below, with Table 5.4 outlining the main theme.

A thematic analysis was conducted to explore participants' insights into the current talent management strategies implemented by the organisation to facilitate the advancement of women into executive roles. The participants described how these strategies are tailored to address the distinct career development needs of women in managerial and leadership positions, and they also shared their perspectives on the perceived effectiveness of these initiatives.

Table 5.4: Thematic analysis to address Objective 3

To evaluate the effectiveness of existing talent management practices in supporting women's advancement into leadership and executive roles within manufacturing organisations				
THEME (MAIN)	KEY SUB-THEME (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)	SUPPORTING THEORIES (INTEGRATED)	HOW THE THEORY EXPLAINS THE FINDINGS
Talent management practices & effectiveness (Organisational-Level)	• Biased recruitment and promotion systems • Unequal access to development opportunities • Limited succession planning for women • 'Neutral' HR practices reproducing inequality	HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY (Organisational-Level Lens) <i>Investment in skills, development and opportunities builds human capital that enhances productivity and advancement potential.</i>	• Glass Ceiling Theory • Tokenism Theory • Transformational Leadership Theory <i>These theories are integrated under Human Capital Theory to evaluate how organisations develop, retain and promote women talent.</i>	<i>Explains how effective talent management practices (development, mentorship, promotion and retention) build capabilities, improve retention and enable women to progress into leadership and executive roles.</i>

The findings revealed several barriers including biased recruitment and promotion systems, unequal access to development opportunities, limited succession planning for women, and male-dominated talent pipelines.

Human capital theory was adopted as the primary theoretical lens because it explains how investment in employee development enhances leadership capability and advancement potential. Supporting theories such as the Tokenism theory, Glass ceiling theory and Transformational leadership theory were integrated to explain how organisations develop, retain, and promote talent.

5.4.1 Sub-theme 1: Biased recruitment and promotion systems

The first sub-theme that emerged under equitable talent management systems was the biased recruitment and promotion systems. Modern recruitment practices are increasingly shaped by the principles of fairness, representation, and strategic inclusion (Latura & Weeks, 2022). Organisations striving for equitable talent acquisition are not just focused on merit-based selection, but also on eliminating systemic barriers and promoting diversity as a core value (SHRM, 2021; CIPD, 2023).

Reflecting on personal experience, Donald described a nuanced but powerful recruitment dynamic:

“The recruitment process is overseen by the People Team in collaboration with the Head of Department (HOD), which ensures that inclusion and fairness are central to decision-making practices.” (Donald).

Tony noted:

“While it's not mandatory to hire a Black female candidate, we aim to select individuals who best fit the job requirements. The recruitment process involves oversight from our People Team and the Head of Department (HOD), ensuring that diversity and inclusion are integral considerations during hiring.” (Tony).

This example illustrates a practice sometimes referred to as ‘tie-breaker selection’ under employment equity frameworks. When candidates are closely matched in qualifications and competencies, organisations may lawfully and ethically select a candidate from an under-represented group to address diversity imbalances (OECD, 2020). This is aligned with South Africa’s Employment Equity Act, which encourages proactive measures to redress historical inequalities in the workforce (Department of Labour, 2015).

The participant further noted:

“I’ve seen intentional recruitment strategies aimed at increasing female representation, with specific targets set and cascaded throughout the organisation to strengthen the gender balance at all levels.” (Linda).

In observing the recruitment practices within the organisation, I noted a significant contrast between the ideals presented by the People Team and department heads and the lived attitudes expressed by some managers. On the one hand, the People Team, in collaboration with Heads of Department, assert that inclusion and fairness are central to decision-making in recruitment. These statements signal an organisational commitment to equitable practices, suggesting that recruitment is being aligned with the values of diversity, fairness, and transformation.

A key challenge within TM is overcoming biases in recruitment processes, particularly those that disproportionately favour male candidates in certain roles. As one participant noted:

“When it comes to recruitment and hiring, there does tend to be a noticeable bias in favour of men particularly in production-level roles.” (James).

This bias is well-documented in the literature, with gender-based discrimination being a persistent challenge in traditionally male-dominated sectors (Rozario *et al.*, 2020). Despite this, deliberate efforts to increase diversity have gained momentum.

This proactive approach aligns with broader industry trends emphasising the need for greater gender and racial diversity in the workplace, particularly in technical fields such as engineering (Catalyst, 2020). As noted by Glass and Cook (2016), the under-representation of women in technical and executive roles is a significant barrier to gender equality in the workplace. However, such efforts are not without their challenges. Charles reflected as follows on the complexity of the recruitment process:

"When it comes to the recruitment process itself, it's quite rigorous, perhaps even too rigorous at times. While it's thorough and well-structured, it can end up excluding candidates who might have been capable and could have succeeded if given the opportunity." (Charles).

In the pursuit of organisational goals and strategies, talent management (TM) has become a cornerstone of modern human resource practices. This includes the recruitment, development, and retention of top-tier employees across various occupational and hierarchical levels (Macpherson, 2020). However, despite the increasing focus on TM, its effectiveness has been challenged by global talent issues such as talent glut, talent scarcity, personnel relocation, and the complexities of remuneration (Welch *et al.*, 2021).

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

However, my observation during an engagement with Tony revealed a deeply concerning and contradictory perspective. Tony explicitly stated that it is "not mandatory" to hire a Black female candidate and that selection should focus solely on "who best fits the job." While meritocracy is important, this narrative is often weaponised to justify the continued exclusion of under-represented groups, particularly in contexts in which structural inequalities limit access to opportunities for career development and leadership preparation.

Tony's assertion implies that there is no obligation to promote racial or gender equity in team composition, particularly within his own department. The subtext here is clear: Black people, especially Black women, are not being prioritised in leadership pipelines within teams that remain predominantly white and male. This mindset is emblematic

of a deeper institutional problem, namely, the failure to acknowledge the impact of systemic exclusion and to take responsibility for redressing historical and current disparities.

From a feminist and intersectional perspective, this is especially alarming. It suggests that diversity and inclusion are viewed as optional rather than integral, and that there is no accountability mechanism enforcing Employment Equity (EE) within departments. This not only undermines the organisation's broader transformation goals but also maintains and reinforces power structures that marginalise Black professionals, particularly women of colour within leadership spaces.

Tony's view also reflects a misunderstanding of what meaningful equity entails. Equity does not mean hiring individuals solely based on race or gender it means recognising that equal treatment in unequal systems reproduces inequality. It means providing access, support, mentorship, and opportunities to individuals who have been historically and systemically excluded, so that they too can 'best fit' the job requirements through development and sponsorship.

The absence of intentional strategies to identify, develop, and mentor Black women for senior roles reinforces a culture of gatekeeping, where leadership remains the preserve of those already advantaged by race, gender, and institutional familiarity. Tony's perspective exposes a significant implementation gap between policy and practice, which risks rendering organisational commitments to transformation performative.

Therefore, as a feminist researcher, I believe this points to the urgent need for the organisation to move beyond surface-level diversity policies, and to implement concrete, measurable interventions within departments.

From my observation as a feminist researcher, the recruitment and selection processes in male-dominated industries, such as manufacturing and production, reflect deeply embedded gender biases that hinder women's participation and advancement. These biases are not always overt but are often structurally ingrained and culturally normalised, subtly shaping who gets hired, promoted, or even encouraged to apply.

In many cases, there is a noticeable bias in favour of men, especially at the production level. Specific roles are often implicitly or explicitly gendered, with certain job titles or

functions immediately assumed to be ‘men’s work’. For example, comments such as “this position is typically for men”, are made even before recruitment begins, preconditioning the process to exclude women. This gendered framing discourages women, especially those from under-represented or previously disadvantaged backgrounds, from even considering these roles, thereby, in effect, reinforcing occupational segregation.

Moreover, from my analysis, the recruitment process itself is highly rigorous in ways that may not always be equitable. Instead of assessing potential and supporting growth, the process often demands a narrow set of predefined competencies, time availability, and physical capability standards that fail to accommodate the real-life contexts and strengths of many women applicants. For instance, the expectation of 24/7 availability or an assumption that candidates must have “done it all before”, disadvantages women who may have caregiving responsibilities or who have been excluded from prior opportunities due to systemic inequality.

The environment surrounding recruitment is not always enabling for women. Women, whether Black, white, or women of colour, may face additional psychological pressure or self-doubt, having to constantly justify their capability, availability, and leadership potential. Interviews may take place in spaces where they are uncomfortable expressing themselves, especially in front of predominantly male panels who may not understand or appreciate the complexities of gendered experiences in the workplace. These dynamics do not reflect a neutral process but rather a gatekeeping structure that subtly filters out women under the guise of meritocracy.

5.4.2 Sub-theme 2: Unequal access to development opportunities

The second sub-theme that emerged under equitable talent management systems was the unequal access to development opportunities. The participants expressed deep concerns about the lack of equitable talent management systems for women in the manufacturing sector. A sub-theme that emerged was unequal access to development opportunities.

Cynthia stated:

“When the industry does not provide employees with opportunities for training, skill development, and career advancement, they are exhibiting a lack of employee development.” (Cynthia).

This leads to disengagement, high turnover rates, and ultimately, a decline in organisational effectiveness. (Boselie & Thunnissen, 2017).

Cate emphasised the importance of preparing individuals before promoting them into leadership roles, especially executive positions:

“Before promoting someone into an executive role, they need to be properly prepared and that preparation comes from intentional training and development.” (Cate).

This aligns with the findings of Mahssouni *et al.* (2022), who stressed the need for targeted leadership development, particularly in fostering women’s careers to meet rising organisational demands.

The need for long-term investment in female talent was also highlighted:

“The real question is: do companies have systems in place to identify promising female talent and strategically mentor and develop them over several years to be ready for executive leadership, not just managerial roles? In many cases, this level of planning and investment is still lacking.” (James).

This concern resonates with research by Bilan *et al.* (2020) and Hordofa (2023), who argued that companies often overlook systematic leadership preparation for women, which can hinder their progression to senior roles.

The participants also discussed the limited availability of formal mentorship programmes, which were viewed as a critical gap in current talent management strategies. As one participant explained:

“I believe there’s significant room for improvement when it comes to tools and strategies within talent management especially those focused on the development and growth of women. One major gap I’ve observed is the lack of formal mentorship programmes. For me, mentorship is crucial, and by that, I mean structured programmes that intentionally pair women with experienced mentors who can guide and support them throughout their career journeys.” (Nisha).

This observation aligns with that of Mcilongo and Strydom (2021), who identified mentorship as a key element for women's advancement in organisations, but one that is often insufficiently implemented.

Another participant shared a personal experience to illustrate the potential of career development when organisational support is provided:

"Using myself as an example, I'm proof that career growth aligned with personal interest is possible. When I joined the company six years ago, I expressed a clear interest in sustainability even though I had no prior experience or skills in the field. Over time, and with the support of the organisation, I eventually became the Sustainability Director. My appointment wasn't based on existing expertise but rather on my passion and long-term aspirations. This outcome shows how valuable it is to have systems like the OPR [Operational Performance Review] process, which give individuals a platform to share their career goals and receive organisational support in pursuing them." (Cate).

This reflects the views of Ka (2020), who highlighted the importance of structured review processes in aligning individual aspirations with organisational goals.

These reflections support existing literature that emphasises the growing significance of talent management in manufacturing, driven by increasing competition and the need for enhanced human capital (Khilji & Schuler, 2017; Tyskbo, 2019). Recruitment, as Ka (2020) notes, remains a fundamental component of the talent management framework. Furthermore, the broader shift toward inclusive talent strategies reflects a recognition of women's potential in executive leadership roles and the need for systems that provide equal access to development opportunities (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021).

One participant shared a positive example from their organisation:

"In several of our plants, we've appointed female senior managers an achievement in an industry traditionally dominated by men. While there's commendable diversity at the managerial level, the shop floor still reflects significant gender disparities, with women being markedly under-represented. Consequently, female leaders in roles management remain a minority. Our talent management practices have facilitated some progress." (Kenny).

Kenny continued as follows:

"For instance, one female senior manager has recently advanced to become a director, overseeing multiple manufacturing plants in another country. This progression underscores the potential for career growth within our organisation. However, to foster a more inclusive environment, it's imperative

to implement targeted strategies that address the existing gender imbalances, especially at the operational levels. By doing so, we can ensure that our talent management systems support and promote diversity across all tiers of the organisation." (Kenny).

Implementing personalised development plans, mentorship programmes, and actively addressing systemic biases are crucial steps toward creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for women's career progression. This can help overcome the barriers that often limit women's access to leadership roles and ensure they are provided with the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

My findings, as a feminist researcher, indicate that training, development, and talent identification remain substantial obstacles to women's advancement in male-dominated industries, particularly in industrial and manufacturing contexts. Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) advocated for the establishment of institutionalised mentorship and training initiatives aimed at women, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as manufacturing.

Cynthia, contemplating her experiences, highlighted the ongoing deficiency of organised training and development options for women. She asserted that the lack of focused development pathways directly obstructs the possibilities for upward mobility. Cynthia's comments accord with the finding of Jibril (2022), who emphasised that without deliberate planning, the likelihood of attaining senior positions diminishes considerably. Cynthia contended that without intentional investment in women's education and development, organisations cannot anticipate enduring progress of women into leadership positions. Cynthia emphatically stated that advancement should follow preparation, and for women to succeed in senior positions, they must possess the appropriate abilities, experiences, and mentorship. Cynthia's assertions correspond with the findings of Dirisu *et al.* (2018), who underscored that effective career growth relies on both individual initiative and institutional backing, with collaboration being crucial.

James, in alignment with this view, posed a critical question: Does the organisation have systems in place to identify and nurture female talent? His inquiry speaks volumes. If someone like James who holds influence and appears actively engaged in

transformation conversations is unaware of such policies or systems, it implies a serious disconnect between organisational intent and practice. This gap underscores the invisibility or nonexistence of clear talent development pipelines for women, which may explain the continued gender imbalance in leadership.

From a feminist perspective, the absence of organised mentorship, sponsorship, and institutionalised leadership development programmes sustains institutional inequity. This also indicates an organisational culture that presumes leadership aptitude is inherent in men and must be demonstrated by women, frequently through elevated performance criteria and emotional labour.

Murray and Roca (2021) asserted that this is the reason women's roles remain predominantly obscured in national policy frameworks and industrial planning processes. Policies infrequently tackle structural impediments, including the absence of affordable childcare, gender-responsive workplace facilities, or leadership development initiatives for women in industrial environments (Murray & Roca, 2021).

Surprisingly, Cate offered a counter-narrative. She presented herself as a rare success story: a woman who has progressed through the ranks and attributes her growth to her alignment with personal goals and engagement with the Performance Review (PR) process. Cate's trajectory provides insight into the potential effectiveness of formal systems, such as operational performance reviews, in identifying and supporting female leadership. However, from a critical feminist lens, Cate's success appears to be the exception, not the norm; perhaps she is the one in ten women who are fortunate enough to navigate a pathway not easily accessible to others.

Cate also acknowledged that while she benefited from systemic processes, these processes are not widely understood or utilised across the organisation. The shop floor, for instance, still reflects a high concentration of women in low-tier or entry-level roles, with limited visibility or access to leadership pathways. This reveals a critical communication gap and failure to institutionalise systems that can uplift women consistently across departments.

If the performance management and development system that Cate references is genuinely effective, it should be replicated, standardised, and made transparent across the organisation. As a senior leader, Cate is in a position to advocate for formal mentorship structures, and from a feminist research perspective, her suggestion that

each leader mentor at least one female employee in their respective areas could be a transformational intervention.

As a feminist researcher, I observed a noteworthy case in which one of the senior female managers advanced to a director-level role, now overseeing multiple manufacturing plants nationally. Her upward trajectory is commendable and exemplifies the potential impact of targeted development, exposure, and sponsorship when the right structures are put in place. However, her case stands out as an exception rather than the norm, as she appears to be only one out of ten women who has reached such a position in this organisational context.

Upon deeper investigation, it became evident that her development journey was vertical in nature, a true upward progression unlike the horizontal movement often observed among other women, where roles change laterally with limited actual career advancement. This kind of side-to-side movement does little to address the structural inequalities that women face in climbing the leadership ladder.

What becomes troubling, from a feminist standpoint, is the institutional response to this singular success. Rather than examining the specific systems, policies, and support mechanisms that facilitated her growth, and scaling them across the organisation, her success is too often used as proof that the system works for all women, when in fact, it does not.

This type of tokenistic representation is problematic. It creates a false narrative of inclusion and progress, while the majority of women continue to face invisible barriers, subjective assessments, and inconsistent mentorship. Advancement should not be based on how one's manager 'feels' about them or individual bias; rather, it must be structured, equitable, and replicable.

5.4.3 Sub-theme 3: Limited succession planning for women

The third sub-theme that emerged under equitable talent management systems was the limited succession planning for women. Mentorship and succession planning for women plays a critical role in helping women balance their work and personal lives. Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) highlighted that mentorship is particularly valuable for the career progression of historically marginalised women, especially within the South African manufacturing industry. One significant issue arising from the limited

succession planning for women without the support of seasoned professionals, employees may struggle to navigate their career paths, potentially leading to stagnation. This is especially concerning for women and minorities, who already face structural barriers in advancing to leadership roles (Pors, 2021). Linda emphasised:

"In my experience, having the right sponsors within the industry played a critical role in my career progression. Without them, I likely wouldn't have been considered for the role, as I may have been perceived as lacking sufficient experience. This highlights a flaw in our recruitment and selection processes, which often overlook individuals with potential who could excel if given the opportunity." (Linda).

James continued:

"Additionally, while there is significant emphasis on talent retention within our talent management practices, we're not executing it effectively. High turnover rates and the loss of capable professionals suggest that, although the tools exist, there are considerable gaps in their application." (James).

Nancy echoed this sentiment:

"Personally, I believe that without the support of the right sponsors in the industry, I probably wouldn't have been considered for the role I'm in today. I might have been overlooked due to a perceived lack of experience. This highlights a gap in our recruitment and selection processes, where potential candidates who could thrive in a role are often excluded because they don't fit the conventional profile." (Nancy).

A lack of mentorship and succession planning can also lead to a dearth of essential skills within organisations. Experienced employees hold critical institutional knowledge that may be lost upon their retirement or departure if not adequately shared. To ensure business continuity and prepare the next generation of leaders, organisations must focus on knowledge transfer. Bonvillain (2020) underscored that without formal mentorship programmes, organisations may risk reduced innovation and ineffective leadership succession planning. Nisha suggested:

"Organisations should put in place formal mentorship programmes that match seasoned employees with less experienced personnel in order to alleviate the dearth of mentorship. Regular interactions, goal setting, and career conversations should all be encouraged by the architecture of these programmes. Companies can also take advantage of reverse mentorship,

where senior leaders and junior staff members exchange knowledge on emerging technology and market trends." (Nisha).

Linda's experience highlights the essential role of mentorship, coaching, and sponsorship in influencing women's leadership paths. Linda's sentiments match that of Zhang (2020), who asserted that mentoring is an essential component of leadership development, generally recognised today. Linda's introspection indicated that access to appropriate sponsors and organisational support systems was crucial for her professional development. She credited her growth partly to formal leadership development tools, and more importantly, to the presence of personal champions who actively validated her abilities and facilitated her progression in a male-dominated environment. Linda concurs with Strydom (2021) regarding the critical need of mentorship, especially in aiding women from underprivileged backgrounds to penetrate the historically male-dominated manufacturing industry.

Linda's testimony reinforces the broader feminist argument that women often do not lack capability but lack access to networks, advocates, and opportunities that men more readily receive due to entrenched gendered organisational cultures. Her story highlights that without deliberate intervention and sponsorship, even highly skilled women may be overlooked, particularly when they are still developing or are perceived as less experienced.

James, nevertheless, presented a sobering counterpoint by emphasising a prevailing institutional deficiency: although the organisation formerly prioritised mentorship and talent retention, these mechanisms have declined in both visibility and actual implementation. He observed that while developmental tools like mentorship and coaching programmes are theoretically available, they are not being properly executed or incorporated into the organisation's long-term strategy. This indicates a systemic decline, wherein formerly effective measures are neither prioritised nor managed, leading to talent attrition and elevated turnover of skilled workers. Boselie and Thunnissen (2017) asserted that, despite its acknowledged significance, active mentorship programmes facilitating women's advancement remain underutilised, even if such mentorship provides advantages for personal development.

One of the major challenges highlighted by the participants is managing uncertainty and change, which leaders face in the rapidly evolving business environment.

Industries are frequently impacted by changes, market fluctuations, and technological advancements. Employee resistance to change often hinders progress, making it difficult to successfully implement new initiatives. To facilitate smooth transitions, leaders must adopt effective change management strategies, involve stakeholders in the process, and be able to clearly communicate the organisation's vision (Bodilenyana & Chinunda, 2022).

The lack of career development opportunities is a key contributor to employee stagnation, as emphasised by Hordofa (2023). Development opportunities are essential to ensure sustained organisational success, foster employee growth, and enhance job satisfaction. When employees have access to mentorship, career advancement and continuous learning, their engagement, productivity and commitment to their roles improve. Organisations that prioritise development opportunities tend to build strong leadership pipelines, a competitive workforce, and higher employee retention rates.

According to Alessa (2021), managerial and executive development programmes aimed at women have evolved significantly over time. However, these programmes still face significant challenges. James shared the following insight into the lack of development opportunities:

"In terms of talent management, one of the main gaps is the lack of a structured career growth and development plan for employees. There is often no formal training plan in place, and financial investment in employees' growth is minimal. While companies expect employees to learn on the job, it's sometimes challenging because formal training is essential for deeper learning and development. However, due to cost-consciousness, many businesses are reluctant to invest in external training opportunities or funding degrees for employees to further their education. This is a key area that needs improvement." (James).

This aligns with the findings of Asaleye and Strydom (2022), which underscored that employees may feel undervalued and disengaged when they do not see clear career advancement prospects within their organisation. The lack of formal training programmes, mentorship, and leadership development opportunities can prevent employees from acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary for promotion. The participant elaborated further:

"In terms of talent management, a lot of the growth and development process is self-driven. There isn't a clear, structured career growth plan or formal training programme in place." (Susan).

Despite the positive evolution of women's managerial and executive development programmes, there are still contentious issues. Nguyen *et al.* (2020) highlighted that these programmes remain a topic of debate, with persistent challenges.

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

From a feminist perspective, this disparity is particularly concerning, as it perpetuates inequality by neglecting to assist women who are entering or progressing through the early and middle phases of their professions. The lack of institutional mentorship frameworks at subordinate levels of the organisational hierarchy disproportionately impacts women, who are more frequently marginalised from informal networks of influence that predominantly favour men. Verick (2018) cautioned that women frequently encounter heightened scrutiny in mentorship arrangements, particularly with male sponsors, which may restrict their inclination to engage completely in the mentoring relationship.

Linda's experience exemplifies that women flourish when they have sponsorship and mentorship. Consequently, if such support structures were to be institutionalised instead of being incidental or exclusive to a privileged minority, they may function as significant mechanisms to demolish the obstacles women encounter in leadership progression. Klasen (2019) asserted that when mentorship is congruent with overarching organisational change objectives, it serves as a catalyst for transformation at both individual and organisational levels.

From my observation, and supported by insights shared by James, it is clear that the current state of employee development within the focal organisation is fragmented, inconsistent, and lacks strategic direction. There appears to be no clearly structured career development plans in place for employees across the board, and this gap is particularly detrimental to women's career progression.

James pointed out that the development process within the organisation is largely self-driven, meaning that employees are expected to chart their own growth without formal support structures, mentoring systems, or tailored training plans. This kind of unstructured environment does not serve all employees equally, especially not

women, who often face additional institutional and societal barriers within male-dominated industries such as manufacturing.

From a feminist research perspective, the absence of targeted development frameworks not only contributes to the persistence of the glass ceiling but also reinforces systemic inequities. Women in the organisation do not have access to clearly defined 'next steps' in their careers, nor do they have visibility on the pathways that would enable them to progress into leadership positions. As a result, their growth is often stalled, not because of a lack of talent or potential, but because of a lack of organisational planning and support.

5.4.4 Sub-theme 4: Male-dominated talent pipelines

The fourth sub-theme that emerged under equitable talent management systems was the male-dominated talent pipelines. Currently, there appears to be a lack of a specific talent management system designed to support the advancement of women into leadership roles. While there is an acknowledgment of the need to improve the development of women transitioning from managerial to executive positions, there seems to be a lack of concrete plans to address this gap. The existing talent management approaches are largely generic, and may inadvertently disadvantage women, particularly in environments where they are under-represented.

Lisa shared the following statement:

"In terms of talent management, there isn't a clear, structured career growth plan or formal training programme in place." (Lisa).

This perspective aligns with the concern that the current systems may not adequately address the specific needs of women striving to move into leadership positions.

To foster meaningful progress, talent development strategies must be individualised, focusing on each person's unique career aspirations and challenges. For example, if a woman aims to transition from a quality manager to a quality director, her development plan should address the specific hurdles she may face, such as potential biases from senior leadership. Engaging these leaders in the development process ensures their support and commitment to her advancement.

Betty elaborated as follows:

“To foster meaningful progress, talent development strategies should be individualised, focusing on each person’s unique career aspirations and challenges. For instance, if a woman aims to transition from a quality manager to a quality director, the development plan should address specific hurdles she might face, such as potential biases from senior leadership. Engaging these leaders in the development process can ensure their support and commitment to her advancement.” (Betty).

Implementing personalised development plans, mentorship programmes, and actively addressing systemic biases are crucial steps toward creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for women's career progression. This can help overcome the barriers that often limit women's access to leadership roles and ensure they are provided with the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

From my feminist research perspective, Lisa raised critical concerns about the lack of structured career growth plans and formal training programmes within the organisation. She highlighted that talent management systems are fragmented, for example, some departments have clearly defined processes, while others seem entirely unaware that such systems even exist. This disparity points to deep structural inconsistencies that affect all employees, but disproportionately disadvantage women and other under-represented groups, who often rely more heavily on transparent systems to access developmental opportunities.

Lisa's insights reveal that career progression is not uniformly accessible. In certain pockets of the organisation, employees, particularly women, may be completely disconnected from any formal development pipeline, leaving them without the necessary guidance, mentorship, or support structures to grow. This creates a system in which only a select few departments or individuals benefit, while others remain directionless or excluded.

From a feminist standpoint, this issue is indicative of the hidden forms of institutional bias that perpetuate inequality. When access to growth is inconsistent and opaque, it tends to favour those already in privileged positions or networks, which are often male-dominated spaces, while leaving women with unclear pathways forward. Without standardised, organisation-wide systems, women's careers are left to chance, or the goodwill of individual managers, rather than supported by a deliberate and inclusive talent strategy.

5.4.5 Sub-theme 5: “Neutral” HR practices reproducing inequality

The fifth sub-theme that emerged under equitable talent management systems was the “Neutral” HR practices reproducing inequality. In this regard, Cate shared the following:

"As I mentioned earlier, from a recruitment perspective, we take pride in promoting from within. We consistently provide opportunities for graduates and young professionals to grow and progress within the organisation. Our talent process follows an annual cycle, which culminates in what we refer to as an OPR or Organisational People Review meeting." (Cate).

This structured approach aligns with best practices in TM, where regular reviews and clear performance metrics are used to guide promotions and development opportunities (Bruder & Baar, 2024).

Another participant further noted:

"We also have a structured performance management system in place. As of 2025, individuals are rated based on their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and personal development plans are part of that framework. When someone demonstrates potential and expresses interest in advancing essentially raising their hand to say, 'I want to be next' that's where our succession planning process comes in." (Linda).

Such systems are crucial in mitigating biases by providing transparent criteria for advancement, ensuring that promotions are based on merit, rather than subjective perceptions (Cardon & Arwine, 2023).

The same participant also highlighted:

"I've also observed intentional recruitment strategies, with clearly defined targets cascaded throughout the organisation. These efforts are specifically aimed at strengthening gender diversity, particularly by increasing the representation of women across all levels." (Linda).

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

From my observation as a feminist researcher, the HR practices reproducing inequality processes within the organisation are presented as grounded in best practices that utilise structured performance reviews, competency frameworks, and talent calibration tools. These systems are meant to support fair and transparent decisions regarding

promotions and succession planning. However, in practice, these tools often do not translate into equitable outcomes, particularly for women, and even more so for women of colour or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Although performance indicators (KPIs) are designed to offer objectivity, the question remains: Are these tools truly being applied in ways that advance equity? If they were genuinely equitable in application, we would expect to see the equal or near-equal representation of women and men in leadership roles. However, current patterns reveal a different story. The under-representation of women in higher-level positions indicates that something in the system continues to reproduce exclusion, despite formal frameworks that suggest fairness.

For instance, Linda, a senior leader in the organisation, expressed that performance and recruitment strategies are clearly defined and cascaded through the organisation. From her vantage point, the system seems to function well. However, my feminist analysis reveals a disconnection between the policy-level view and the lived realities of employees on the ground. While formal intentions exist, their impact is often diluted or distorted by biases embedded in implementation.

One key issue is that the system tends to reward visibility over merit. Individuals who are outspoken, assertive, or well-networked within dominant groups are more likely to be noticed and considered for leadership opportunities. Linda herself acknowledged that individuals who 'raise their hands' are seen as candidates for growth. This approach disadvantages introverted individuals, or those from cultures or backgrounds where self-promotion is discouraged. It also overlooks the many women who quietly perform exceptionally, are still excluded from growth trajectories simply because they are not 'loud' or do not align with dominant leadership archetypes.

This reveals a deep structural flaw in how talent is recognised. The current system values confidence over competence, and presence over potential a reality that disproportionately affects women, particularly those who carry additional social burdens or caregiving responsibilities that limit their visibility at work. Furthermore, informal practices, such as managers having too much discretion in interpreting KPIs, can lead to subjective biases in ratings, especially if a manager lacks gender sensitivity or holds unconscious stereotypes.

From a feminist lens, it becomes clear that performance management, though outwardly gender-neutral, is often gender-blind, failing to account for systemic disadvantages, gender norms, or unequal access to opportunity. In this context, the system becomes a gatekeeping mechanism, upholding existing power hierarchies rather than challenging them.

5.5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS OF CODED SEGMENTS FOR OBJECTIVE 4

Research objective 4: To explore the influence of intersectionality, encompassing gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors, on the advancement opportunities for women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry. The themes related to Objective 4 are discussed in the sub-section below, with Table 5.5 outlining the main and sub-themes. The analysis of all the participants experience followed a similar approach, which involved an assessment of the main themes that emerged that would give an impression of the overall approach to systematically examines macro-societal factors influencing women's leadership advancement within South Africa's manufacturing sector.

As the fourth objective was related to the respondent's experience, the first interview question focused on exploring the influence of intersectionality, encompassing gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors, on the advancement opportunities for women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry.

Table 5.5: Thematic analysis to address Objective 4

Research Objective 4: To explore the influence of intersectionality, encompassing gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors, on the advancement opportunities for women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry.				
THEME (MAIN)	KEY SUB-THEME (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)	SUPPORTING THEORIES (INTEGRATED)	HOW THE THEORY EXPLAINS THE FINDINGS
Intersectional Factors (Societal-Level)	• Patriarchal social norms • Racial and gender intersectionality • Structural inequality • Socio-economic barriers • Cultural expectations affecting women's advancement	INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY (Societal-Level) <i>Overlapping social identities and structural power dynamics create unique advantages and disadvantages for women.</i>	• Feminist Theory (patriarchy, power and inequality) • Social Role Theory (gendered social norms) These theories are integrated under Intersectionality Theory to explain macro-societal structures.	<i>Explains how patriarchy and intersecting identities (gender, race, class, ethnicity) shape women's access to opportunities, expose them to systemic discrimination and create structural barriers within South Africa's socio-economic and cultural context.</i>

The findings revealed several societal barriers including patriarchal social norms, racial and gender intersectionality, structural inequality, socio-economic barriers, and cultural expectations affecting women's advancement.

Intersectionality theory was adopted as the primary theoretical lens because it explains how overlapping identities such as gender, race, and class interact to create unique experiences of inequality and disadvantage. Supporting theories including feminist theory, and social role theory were integrated to explain how societal structures and systemic inequalities influence women's leadership opportunities.

5.5.1 Sub-theme 1: Patriarchal social norms

The first sub-theme that emerged under macro societal factors was the patriarchal social norms. A person's socio-economic background significantly influences their career path and long-term professional opportunities.

"Someone coming from a poor family might struggle with basic logistics like getting to the office every day because of unreliable transport or not being able to attend early morning or late evening meetings due to home responsibilities."
(Nancy).

It was alluded to during the discussion that individuals coming from poor families often struggle with basic logistics, such as transportation, punctuality, or consistent workplace access, due to economic constraints. As a feminist, I interpret this as a critical intersection of identity, socio-economic background, and gendered social responsibilities, which disproportionately affect women in sectors like manufacturing.

These compounded disadvantages, where poverty, gender, and systemic exclusion intersect, create significant barriers to upward mobility for women. For many, the burden of caregiving, unreliable transport, and rigid workplace schedules become obstacles that are often invisible to leadership, yet deeply impactful in day-to-day functioning. Women from under-resourced communities may not have the same access to mentorship, networking opportunities, or even the freedom to fully engage in developmental roles, which are key pathways to advancement.

5.5.2 Sub-theme 2: Racial and gender intersectionality

The second sub-theme that emerged under macro societal factors was the racial and gender intersectionality. In the context of the workplace, this concept reveals how

employees with multiple marginalised identities can face compounded disadvantages that traditional diversity and inclusion initiatives often overlook (Holmas *et al.*, 2021).

“This intersectionality often results in a more arduous journey compared to that of male counterparts. In Cape Town, where historical racial dynamics add another layer of complexity, the scarcity of Black female senior managers underscores the systemic barriers that persist. The absence of predecessors in such roles not only highlights the lack of representation but also amplifies the pressure on those breaking new ground.” (Lisa).

Black women often experience the effects of racial and gendered workplace bias simultaneously. According to Soraa *et al.* (2019), they are more likely to be overlooked for promotions, be excluded from leadership networks, and will be held to higher standards than white women or Black men. These barriers are often perpetuated by unconscious bias and systemic inequities, which affect performance evaluations, perceptions of leadership potential, and access to mentorship.

Nisha shared the following reflection:

“In certain areas, unconscious bias, stereotypes, and even discrimination against women are deeply ingrained. Women may be expected to take on specific tasks simply because of their gender or, conversely, assumed incapable of handling certain responsibilities. This reflects a broader organisational dynamic where biases both external and internal affect women's professional experiences.” (Nisha).

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

As a feminist scholar, I find it profoundly troubling to witness how intersectionality, particularly the convergence of gender, race and ethnicity, continues to influence and restrict the career paths of women, notably Black women, in the manufacturing industry. Various scholars, such as Patterson *et al.* (2014), Ashcraft and Muhr (2018), and Kimbu *et al.* (2021) indicated that despite women constituting a significant portion of the workforce, their representation in executive and board roles remains disproportionately low, with Black women experiencing further marginalisation due to intersecting gender and racial dynamics.

As a feminist scholar, I have noted that gender frequently interacts with race, especially in the distinct challenges encountered by Black women in the workplace. These linkages generate complex forms of marginalisation that are not consistently

recognised or addressed in wider discussions of gender equity. In my interactions and data gathering, I also obtained input from Indian women who indicated that they are frequently expected to undertake specific duties due to gendered stereotypes regarding their perceived suitability. Simultaneously, they are regarded as unable to manage more intricate or leadership-related duties.

These observations align with that of Ketchiwou (2025) and Matotoka and Odeku (2021), who stated that despite progressive legislation promoting gender equality, women in South Africa, particularly Black women, continually encounter significant barriers to career advancement and promotion in the corporate sector, including manufacturing.

From my positionality as a feminist and my lived experience, I have noted that women, especially women of colour, are frequently required to prove their competence repeatedly, not only to men but also to other racial groups. This constant need to demonstrate capability reflects an underlying, often unconscious, gender and racial bias that persists in many professional environments. Such bias subtly undermines women's authority and contributes to a workplace culture where women may hesitate to assert themselves, even when their performance is on par with or surpasses that of their male colleagues.

These dynamics illustrate how intersectionality plays a crucial role in shaping women's experiences, particularly in male-dominated or racially hierarchical settings. Without addressing these unconscious biases, efforts toward gender equality risk being superficial, as they fail to consider the nuanced realities faced by women across different racial and social contexts.

My observations indicate that developmental opportunities are not allocated equally. Women, in general, are under-represented in top positions, with Black women being especially marginalised, being relegated to lower-tier or entry-level roles. Despite their qualifications and expertise, individuals face unseen, yet formidable obstacles that systematically impede their advancement. This exclusion illustrates the cumulative impacts of patriarchy and racialised frameworks ingrained in organisational systems. These observations coincide with that of Ma *et al.* (2024). It has been asserted that third-wave feminism in this context embraced intersectionality, recognising that

experiences of oppression are shaped by the convergence of several social and political identities, including race, class and sexuality (Ma *et al.*, 2024).

The organogram provided to me illustrated this imbalance clearly. The analysis disclosed a significant predominance of white males in leadership roles, whereas Black females were either completely absent or markedly under-represented in senior or executive positions. This reality contradicts the principles of equity and inclusion and undermines the feminist movement that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s that was characterised by a commitment to policy-driven activism, support for initiatives in the Global South, and a focus on women's studies (Kaalund, 2023). Christensen *et al.*'s (2020) study meticulously examined intersectionality, surpassing the predominantly white, middle-class perspectives of earlier feminist movements to encompass diverse experiences of gender, race, class and sexuality.

From an intersectional feminist viewpoint, this constitutes not only a diversity concern, but a systemic and structural manifestation of discrimination. It illustrates how the intersection of multiple identities, specifically being Black and female, exacerbates the hurdles women encounter in attaining leadership positions, rendering their progression more arduous than that of their male or white female colleagues. Prah and Maggott (2020) elucidated that the third wave expanded feminist discourse by incorporating postcolonial critiques, notably evident in the analysis of South African higher education institutions, where feminist theories are employed to deconstruct patriarchal and racially biased practices.

5.5.3 Sub-theme 3: Structural inequality

The third sub-theme that emerged under the macro societal factors was that of structural inequality. Employees who belong to more than one marginalised group often experience intersecting and compounding discrimination. For example, a woman of colour may face both racial and gender biases, making career advancement significantly more difficult for her than for her white female or male counterparts (Casale & Posel, 2021).

Lisa responded as follows:

“Navigating leadership as a Black woman in South Africa, particularly in traditionally male-dominated industries, presents compounded challenges rooted in both gender and racial biases.” (Lisa).

As Taylor-Abdulai *et al.* (2014) and Suci *et al.* (2022) asserted, when women are culturally and socially expected to shoulder most caregiving and household duties, their capacity to compete equally in the workplace is significantly compromised. These responsibilities often result in women declining late meetings, travel opportunities, or roles with demanding time expectations, factors that are frequently used as informal metrics of leadership potential and organisational commitment.

This was poignantly echoed in Nancy's reflection:

"I believe it's incredibly challenging for women, especially those from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, to grow within organisations. And while this is just my personal perspective, I recognise how deep these challenges run. Even if you take gender out of the equation, someone coming from a poor family might struggle with basic logistics like getting to the office every day because of unreliable transport or not being able to attend early morning or late evening meetings due to home responsibilities." (Nancy).

"When you add gender into the mix, those challenges intensify. Women often have to juggle work demands while still being expected to take care of chores at home or look after siblings or parents. In senior roles." (Nancy).

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

Reflecting on Lisa's response through the lens of a feminist, I noted a critical fault line that often leads women, particularly Black women, to experience deep isolation in leadership roles within male-dominated industries. Lisa's experience illustrates that holding a leadership position as a woman in such spaces is not only challenging, but those challenges are often deeply rooted in structural and cultural exclusion.

To me, her reflections signal that for many Black women, occupying leadership roles in environments where there are few if any others who share similar social identities, can lead to a sense of hyper-isolation. This isolation is not merely physical or professional, but emotional and psychological, as there is often no one within the organisation who fully understands or validates their lived experience. As a result, they are left without a support network or safe space to express the unique pressures they face.

This sense of being 'alone at the top' contributes to what I interpret as hyper-invisibility, a paradox where Black women are highly visible as symbols of progress, yet simultaneously overlooked, undervalued, or unheard in decision-making processes.

The pressure of constantly having to manage one's image, prove one's capability, and navigate unspoken biases becomes an added burden. It limits the ease with which these women can access and sustain leadership roles, and it places a mental and emotional tax on their leadership journey.

Thus, Lisa's experience reveals that promoting women into leadership roles without addressing systemic and cultural exclusion leads to a form of tokenism. It highlights the urgent need for structural support systems, inclusive cultures, and intersectional awareness in leadership development.

In addition to organisational bias and cultural stereotypes, structural factors, such as childcare responsibilities, domestic labour, and socio-economic background, further constrain women's ability to advance professionally. These burdens often fall disproportionately on women, reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting opportunities for visibility, career development, and leadership.

As a feminist researcher, I observed that intersectionality brings to light deeply embedded structural challenges faced by women in the workplace, particularly those from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. One participant poignantly highlighted that for women, the barriers are not only gendered but are also compounded by race, class, and socio-economic status. She spoke of the immense difficulty some of her female colleagues experience simply trying to get to work on time, due to unreliable public transportation systems and the logistical constraints of living far from the workplace.

These challenges are particularly acute for women from low-income households, where access to basic resources, such as dependable transport or childcare, is often limited. The difficulty of attending early morning meetings or staying for late sessions was raised as a recurring obstacle, especially for women with caregiving responsibilities. Whether Black, white, or women of colour, more broadly, women often carry a disproportionate burden of domestic labour, including household chores and child-rearing responsibilities. This dual demand of meeting the expectations of the workplace while managing responsibilities at home places tremendous pressure on women and contributes to ongoing gender inequity.

From my observation, without institutional interventions that consider both gender and class, structural inequities will persist. Measures, such as equitable parental leave,

access to affordable childcare, flexible working schedules, and context-aware performance expectations, are essential for addressing these disparities. Moreover, recognising and actively addressing the socio-economic barriers that many women face is central to building an inclusive and equitable workplace.

The compounded effects of gender and class are often overlooked in conventional workplace policies, which tend to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. Yet, these are precisely the factors that an intersectional lens brings into focus. For genuine workplace equity to be realised, organisations must embrace policies and practices that acknowledge the interconnected nature of gender, race, and socio-economic status. Only then can the structural barriers that continue to disadvantage women, especially those from historically marginalised groups, be dismantled.

5.5.4 Sub-theme 4: Socio-economic barriers

The fourth sub-theme that emerged under macro societal factors was the Socio-economic barriers. The South African government has implemented several initiatives to address systemic socio-economic disparities stemming from its colonial and apartheid history. These include the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), and the National Development Plan (NDP), which serves as the country's overarching development strategy. Complementary initiatives, such as the Presidential Infrastructure Coordination Commission (PICC) and Operation Phakisa, aim to accelerate economic transformation and public service delivery. However, for these programmes to effectively promote gender equality, greater focus must be placed on the inclusion of women, particularly those from historically marginalised groups (National Planning Commission, 2011; Republic of South Africa, 2012).

Cate reflected on this intersection between gender and socio-economic status:

“From my perspective, the challenges faced by women, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are deeply rooted in broader socio-economic issues rather than solely gender-related factors. While gender may influence these challenges, it's important to recognise that systemic socio-economic disparities play a significant role. However, I must acknowledge that I haven't personally encountered or been exposed to specific scenarios that illustrate these challenges in detail.” (Cate).

Nisha highlighted these intersectional burdens:

“Women often have to juggle work demands while still being expected to take care of chores at home or look after siblings or parents. In senior roles, the expectation is simply that people should be available whenever needed. But that’s not always feasible for someone managing both professional and personal responsibilities with limited support. It becomes a huge barrier to growth and development in the workplace.” (Nisha).

During the interview, Cate explained that, from her perspective, many of the challenges faced by women, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are not solely the result of gender-related factors. Rather, she emphasised that these challenges are deeply rooted in broader socio-economic inequalities. While gender certainly intersects with these issues and amplifies their effects, Cate pointed out that systemic socio-economic disparities play a significant role in shaping women's workplace experiences and career trajectories.

An individual's socio-economic background plays a significant role in shaping their career trajectory (Lau *et al.*, 2023). Workers from disadvantaged backgrounds often face systemic barriers that limit their ability to access the same educational, professional, and networking opportunities available to their more affluent peers (Semenya & Kanayo, 2024). These barriers can begin early and compound over time, resulting in inequitable access to career development and upward mobility (Netshivhambe, 2025).

For example, individuals from low-income families may find it difficult to pursue further education due to financial constraints or limited access to quality schooling. In the workplace, they may lack the social capital afforded by professional networks, mentorship, or family connections that often facilitate entry into competitive roles or industries (Phaswana, 2021). Additionally, practices like unpaid internships, costly professional certifications, and exclusive networking events further disadvantage those without the financial means to participate.

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

From my standpoint as a feminist researcher, I interpret Cate's insight as a powerful reminder that intersectionality must consider not only gender but also class and access to resources. Socio-economic background significantly influences an individual's

ability to participate in career development, access professional training, and manage the financial costs of self-development. These barriers are particularly evident for women at the lower end of the economic spectrum. While professional development is often championed as an individual responsibility, the financial burden associated with upskilling can be overwhelming for those who lack economic stability, especially when the organisation or industry does not provide adequate support.

Nancy also described her own experiences and exposure to scenarios where such structural barriers were evident. She mentioned that a common expectation in the workplace is for employees to be constantly available. However, this assumption is unrealistic and unfair for individuals, particularly women, who are balancing professional responsibilities with caregiving or domestic duties, often without sufficient support. This expectation reinforces a workplace culture that privileges availability over inclusivity, ultimately disadvantaging those who cannot meet these demands due to circumstances beyond their control.

From my observation, these lived experiences highlight how organisational cultures often unintentionally exclude women with caregiving responsibilities, particularly those from low-income or under-resourced backgrounds. The lack of structural flexibility such as adaptable work hours, remote options, or support services creates additional barriers that compound over time. These constraints limit not only women's participation in development opportunities but also their long-term career progression.

5.5.5 Sub-theme 5: Cultural expectations affecting women's advancement

The fourth sub-theme that emerged under macro societal factors was cultural expectations affecting women's advancement. Work-life balance remains a significant challenge for many employees, particularly those in lower-paying positions or with caregiving responsibilities.

This issue was echoed by a participant who described how their organisation is addressing some of these disparities:

"The expectation is simply that people should be available whenever needed. But that's not always feasible for someone managing both professional and personal responsibilities with limited support. It becomes a huge barrier to growth and development in the workplace." (Nancy).

As a feminist researcher, my observation of Nancy's experience revealed a critical challenge in male-dominated industries, namely, the persistent assumption that employees, regardless of personal circumstances should be available at all times. Nancy highlighted that this expectation overlooks the lived realities of women who are managing both professional obligations and domestic responsibilities, often with minimal support. This expectation is not only unrealistic but creates significant barriers to women's development and progression in the workplace.

Work-life balance remains a significant challenge, particularly for women in lower-paying positions or those with caregiving responsibilities. The absence of flexible work arrangements disproportionately impacts their ability to perform at their best and pursue opportunities for growth and leadership. This imbalance contributes to a cycle of structural inequality, where the very systems designed to foster productivity inadvertently marginalise those who do not conform to the traditional, male-centred model of the 'ideal worker'.

The impact of these structural gaps is far-reaching. When women, especially those from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds, are denied access to flexible work or supportive policies, their chances of advancing into leadership roles are diminished. This not only affects individual career trajectories but also undermines the broader organisational potential by limiting diversity in decision-making spaces.

Therefore, my observation reinforces the urgent need for intentional, gender-responsive development strategies within industries and sectors where male dominance prevails. Organisations must go beyond surface-level inclusion and adopt structural reforms that address the compounded barriers faced by women. These include implementing flexible work policies, gender-sensitive performance evaluations, equitable access to mentorship and leadership training, and support systems for work-life integration.

By embedding intersectionality into talent development and leadership pipelines, industries can begin to close the gap for women and other under-represented groups. Advancing gender equity is not only a matter of fairness, but also a strategic imperative for inclusive and sustainable organisational growth.

Fostering an inclusive, effective, and engaged workforce requires a strong commitment to fairness, transparency, and structured support (Efobi *et al.*, 2018).

Organisations that prioritise equitable treatment, unbiased decision-making, and comprehensive support systems create environments where employees feel valued, motivated, and empowered to perform at their best (Musavengane & Leonard, 2019). These principles are critical for ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their gender, race, or socio-economic background, have equal opportunities in hiring, promotion, leadership development, remuneration, and work-life balance (Bahn *et al.*, 2020). Donald explained that:

“In our organisation, there is a deliberate commitment to aligning talent acquisition with both key performance indicators (KPIs) and broader diversity goals. While the primary focus remains on selecting the most suitable candidate for each role, gender and diversity are recognised as important considerations in achieving long-term organisational transformation.” (Donald).

Donald interpreted that the organisation has made a deliberate commitment to aligning talent acquisition with both key performance indicators (KPIs) and broader diversity goals. While the primary focus remains on selecting the most suitable candidate for each role, gender diversity is recognised as an important consideration, particularly in the context of motivating long-term organisational transformation. This alignment suggests a progressive attempt to integrate inclusion into performance and hiring strategies.

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

However, as a feminist researcher, I observed critical gaps in the practical implementation and fairness of these systems. While key performance indicators are designed to monitor organisational performance, their application, especially in relation to individual employee progression, can be highly subjective and susceptible to bias. The current system appears to disproportionately empower line managers or immediate supervisors to influence an employee's performance rating, which in turn, affects opportunities for promotion and leadership development.

5.6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF CODED SEGMENTS FOR OBJECTIVE 5

Research objective 5: To examine how effective talent management practices support the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions. The themes corresponding to Objective 5 are examined in the following sub-section, with Table 5.6

highlighting the primary theme. A consistent analytical method was applied to all participant responses, focusing on identifying key themes that reflect the general approach used to develop a talent management framework aimed at promoting women into executive roles.

To explore this further, the fifth interview question addressed participants' experiences. The initial question specifically sought insights into the elements of the existing talent management within their organisations. It also examined how the talent management (TM) actively tackles the barriers faced by women and how it supports their career advancement, with respondents providing details about relevant programmes, initiatives, or policies designed to foster women's professional development.

Table 5.6: Thematic analysis to address Objective 5

Research Objective 5: To examine how effective talent management practices support the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions.				
THEME (MAIN)	KEY SUB-THEME (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)	SUPPORTING THEORIES (INTEGRATED)	HOW THE THEORY EXPLAINS THE FINDINGS
Efficient Talent Management (Integrative-Level)	• Weak implementation of transformation policies • Lack of organisational accountability • Poor integration between HR systems and leadership goals	HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY (<i>Integrative Lens</i>) <i>Interconnected elements (people, processes, policies and culture) must work together to create sustainable change and outcomes.</i>	• Transformational Leadership Theory • Feminist Theory <i>These theories are integrated under Systems Theory to design a holistic and contextually relevant framework.</i>	<i>Provides a holistic lens to design an integrated, sustainable and context-specific Talent Management framework that addresses structural, organisational and individual barriers to advance women into leadership.</i>

The findings revealed weak implementation of transformation policies, lack of organisational accountability, and poor integration between HR systems and leadership goals.

Human capital theory was adopted as the primary theoretical lens because it explains that sustainable organisational change requires interconnected systems, including people, policies, processes, and organisational culture, to work together holistically. Supporting theory such as transformational leadership theory were integrated to strengthen the framework design.

5.6.1 Sub-theme 1: Weak implementation of transformation policies

The second sub-theme that emerged under contextually grounded talent management framework (integrative level) was the weak implementation of transformation policies. In the pursuit of organisational goals and strategies, talent management (TM) has become a cornerstone of modern human resource practices. This includes the recruitment, development, and retention of top-tier employees across various occupational and hierarchical levels (Macpherson, 2020). However, despite the increasing focus on TM, its effectiveness has been challenged by global talent issues such as talent glut, talent scarcity, personnel relocation, and the complexities of remuneration (Welch *et al.*, 2021).

A key challenge within TM is overcoming biases in recruitment processes, particularly those that disproportionately favour male candidates in certain roles. As one participant noted:

"When it comes to recruitment and hiring, there does tend to be a noticeable bias in favour of men particularly in production-level roles." (James).

This bias is well-documented in the literature, with gender-based discrimination being a persistent challenge in traditionally male-dominated sectors (Rozario *et al.*, 2020). Despite this, deliberate efforts to increase diversity have gained momentum.

This proactive approach aligns with broader industry trends emphasising the need for greater gender and racial diversity in the workplace, particularly in technical fields such as engineering (Catalyst, 2020). As noted by Glass and Cook (2016), the under-representation of women in technical and executive roles is a significant barrier to gender equality in the workplace. However, such efforts are not without their challenges. Charles reflected as follows on the complexity of the recruitment process:

"When it comes to the recruitment process itself, it's quite rigorous, perhaps even too rigorous at times. While it's thorough and well-structured, it can end up excluding candidates who might have been capable and could have succeeded if given the opportunity." (Charles).

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

From my observation as a feminist researcher, the recruitment and selection processes in male-dominated industries, such as manufacturing and production, reflect deeply embedded gender biases that hinder women's participation and

advancement. These biases are not always overt but are often structurally ingrained and culturally normalised, subtly shaping who gets hired, promoted, or even encouraged to apply.

In many cases, there is a noticeable bias in favour of men, especially at the production level. Specific roles are often implicitly or explicitly gendered, with certain job titles or functions immediately assumed to be ‘men’s work’. For example, comments such as “this position is typically for men”, are made even before recruitment begins, preconditioning the process to exclude women. This gendered framing discourages women, especially those from under-represented or previously disadvantaged backgrounds, from even considering these roles, thereby, in effect, reinforcing occupational segregation.

Moreover, from my analysis, the recruitment process itself is highly rigorous in ways that may not always be equitable. Instead of assessing potential and supporting growth, the process often demands a narrow set of predefined competencies, time availability, and physical capability standards that fail to accommodate the real-life contexts and strengths of many women applicants. For instance, the expectation of 24/7 availability or an assumption that candidates must have “done it all before”, disadvantages women who may have caregiving responsibilities or who have been excluded from prior opportunities due to systemic inequality.

The environment surrounding recruitment is not always enabling for women. Women, whether Black, white, or women of colour, may face additional psychological pressure or self-doubt, having to constantly justify their capability, availability, and leadership potential. Interviews may take place in spaces where they are uncomfortable expressing themselves, especially in front of predominantly male panels who may not understand or appreciate the complexities of gendered experiences in the workplace. These dynamics do not reflect a neutral process but rather a gatekeeping structure that subtly filters out women under the guise of meritocracy.

5.6.2 Sub-theme 2: Lack of organisational accountability

The third sub-theme that emerged under contextually grounded talent management framework (integrative level) was the lack of organisational accountability. The promotion and representation of women in leadership roles remain critical issues in organisational development (Erthal & Marques, 2018; Bahn *et al.*, 2020). Despite

strides being made in gender equality, systemic biases and structural barriers continue to hinder women's advancement to managerial and executive positions.

Linda highlighted the following:

"I've observed intentional recruitment strategies, with clearly defined targets cascaded throughout the organisation. These efforts are specifically aimed at strengthening gender diversity, particularly by increasing the representation of women across all levels." (Linda).

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

From my perspective as a feminist researcher the issue of gender representation in promotion and recruitment practices reveals lack of organisational accountability a significant disjunction between formal policies and actual practices within the organisation. Linda, a senior leader, emphasised that the organisation has intentionally developed recruitment strategies with clearly defined diversity targets, which are said to be cascaded across all levels. These strategies, as stated, are meant to strengthen gender diversity by increasing the representation of women across the hierarchy.

However, based on my feminist analysis and firsthand observation during the interviews with directors and senior leaders, there is a notable misalignment between the organisation's formal strategies and the realities on the ground. While diversity strategies exist on paper, their implementation remains uneven, with pockets of the organisation, particularly in male-dominated departments or senior leadership tiers, showing resistance, apathy, or a lack of accountability toward realising these goals.

This disconnects points to a broader issue: intentionality in policy does not automatically translate into transformation in practice. As a Black woman who has engaged deeply with leaders across the organisation, I have observed a recurring gap in leadership commitment and consciousness. While corporate messaging reflects a progressive stance on gender equity, the actual representation of women, particularly Black women and women of colour, remains significantly lacking in executive and decision-making positions. This highlights the performative nature of some diversity initiatives, where representation is more rhetorical than structural.

The feminist framework urges us to interrogate not only the presence of policies, but also how power operates in their enforcement. In this case, the power to implement

gender equity lies with line managers and senior leaders, many of whom appear disengaged from or unaware of the deeper purpose behind these strategies. Their actions, decisions, and recruitment practices often reveal that they are not aligned with the broader organisational or governmental transformation agendas, including those set forth by South Africa's Employment Equity Act.

From my observation, the current leadership structures appear to be failing to interrogate their own positionality, privilege, and role in perpetuating inequality. There is a pressing need for the organisation to pause and reevaluate whether these diversity and inclusion strategies are being operationalised across every department, not just within HR or through isolated initiatives.

As a feminist practitioner, I also call attention to the intersectional nature of these issues. It is not only about gender, but also about race, class, and historical disadvantage. In the South African context, any gender equity conversation must be deeply informed by our socio-political history, including the ongoing effects of apartheid, systemic racism, and patriarchy. Therefore, the organisation must go beyond policy statements and adopt a transformative agenda, one that interrogates entrenched power dynamics, amplifies marginalised voices, and centres the lived realities of Black women and other under-represented groups.

5.6.3 Sub-theme 3: Poor integration between HR systems and leadership goals

The fourth sub-theme that emerged under contextually grounded talent management framework (integrative level) was poor integration between HR systems and leadership goals. Developing a driven, involved, and productive workforce requires deliberate investment in leadership and career development opportunities. Employees are more likely to remain with an organisation and contribute meaningfully when they perceive a clear pathway for growth and advancement (Noe, 2020). Such initiatives not only foster personal development but also build a resilient leadership pipeline that secures the future of the organisation (Day *et al.*, 2014; Ali & Akter, 2021).

Donald shared a firsthand account highlighting the intersection of leadership, inclusion, and gender dynamics within their workplace. Reflecting on a situation where certain employees resisted taking on particular responsibilities, the participant noted:

“If someone doesn’t want to do their job, that’s their choice, but they can’t selectively refuse certain responsibilities by saying, ‘I can’t do this because I’m a woman.’” (Donald).

This observation aligns with research on stereotype threat and gendered role expectations, which suggest that when individuals internalise limiting societal norms, it can adversely affect workplace participation (Steele, 1997; Heilman, 2012). Counteracting these perceptions requires a culture that encourages equitable responsibility and affirms competence across all genders.

A participant further explained how representation can serve as a motivator and catalyst for cultural change:

“We were very intentional about succeeding in our roles so that more women could follow in our footsteps... We made a pact: we were going to make this work, not just for ourselves, but to pave the way for others too.” (Kare).

Reflections and observations of a feminist researcher

From my observation, the issue of leadership and growth opportunities for women in male-dominated industries, such as manufacturing, is deeply influenced by gendered assumptions around physical labour and the lack of institutional support structures. Donald’s remarks suggested that if someone does not want to perform a particular task, such as lifting heavy loads, that is their personal choice. However, he also implied that refusing such tasks due to gender is viewed negatively, almost as if the individual is unwilling, rather than unable, ignoring the structural and physiological realities that differentiate women’s workplace experiences from that of men.

As a feminist researcher, I interpret this framing as problematic and oppressive, as it places the burden on women to overcome barriers that are inherently designed without them in mind. The majority of women are concentrated in frontline operational roles, where tasks often involve physically demanding work, such as lifting 50 kg materials. Yet, there appears to be no adequate ergonomic support or workplace adjustments put in place to accommodate their physiological differences, such as machinery, tools, or team-based lifting protocols, that could help equalise work conditions.

This lack of consideration reflects a deeper gendered bias embedded in workplace design, where masculinity is treated as the default and physical strength as a benchmark for competence. When women are unable to meet these physical

expectations, not due to lack of effort or will, but due to biological differences and structural constraints, their growth trajectories are unfairly limited. They are perceived as less competent or unfit for leadership, even when they possess the skill, intelligence, and drive needed for advancement.

This supports the assertion that effective leadership development must go beyond technical skills, and incorporate training on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Research by the Center for Creative Leadership (2020) indicates that DEI training significantly enhances leaders' capacity to engage diverse teams and build inclusive cultures.

5.7 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Unconscious bias continues to shape the dynamics in the manufacturing industry, often disadvantaging women, particularly in how they are perceived, evaluated, and treated. These biases can influence women's confidence and sense of belonging, making it critical for leaders to actively recognise and address them. Stereotypes around how women speak, express emotion, or balance family responsibilities create barriers to career progression. Women are often judged more harshly than men and expected to justify themselves, while similar behaviour from male counterparts is accepted or even rewarded. Assumptions about women's availability and ambition, especially during or after maternity leave, result in missed opportunities, with decisions frequently made without consulting the individuals involved. This undermines autonomy and perpetuates unequal treatment. Despite their professional roles, women, particularly mothers, often shoulder more domestic responsibilities than men, which impacts how their commitment is perceived at work, regardless of actual performance or capability.

There are visible and commendable efforts by organisations to increase the representation of women, especially Black South African women, in leadership and male-dominated fields. Some companies have adopted firm targets and non-negotiable measures to drive gender equity. Leadership training increasingly incorporates the themes of inclusion and diversity, equipping leaders with the awareness and tools to foster more equitable work environments. However, intentional action is required to address unconscious bias and to foster inclusivity. Leaders must

be self-aware and willing to challenge both their own assumptions and those of their peers to build a fair and respectful workplace culture.

CHAPTER 6:

PROPOSED TALENT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the framework developed for this study. In the previous chapter, the focus was on the results and discussion based on the findings from the data-collection process that was conducted. As stated previously, the aim of this study is to systematically explore and analyse the various factors that influence a talent management (TM) framework for the advancement of women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry.

The significance and contribution of the current study is that while there is substantial empirical evidence addressing the general challenges women face in the workplace (Smith & Suby-Long, 2019), research specifically focused on the barriers hindering women's progression into managerial and executive roles remains limited, particularly on a global scale. This gap is even more pronounced in the African context, where such studies are not only under-researched but also less frequently published (Eccles, 2021). Therefore, Chapter 6 examines how the results of the data-collection and analysis process can be utilised to develop a framework for the advancement of women to executive management in the manufacturing industry.

This study systematically investigated and evaluated the key factors that shape a talent management framework aimed at promoting the advancement of women into managerial and executive roles within the manufacturing industry. This chapter further explores this TM framework in relation to the study's overall objectives. The chapter further examines how women's career progression aligns with these objectives and leads into the study's findings. Drawing on these insights, a proposed framework is presented, bringing the chapter to a close.

6.2 KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK: OBJECTIVE 1

Table 6.1 summarises the assessment and breaks down the analysis based on the framework used. It categorises themes into sub-themes, which focus on specific areas and key strategies, and expected outcomes aligned with the TM framework.

Table 6.1: Key components of the framework related to Objective 1

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK: RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1				
ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE TRANSFORMATION (Organisational Level Dimension)				
FRAMEWORK DIMENSIONS (From Integrated Theoretical Framework)	KEY BARRIERS IDENTIFIED (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)	SUPPORTING THEORIES (INTEGRATED)	HOW THEORY EXPLAINS THE FRAMEWORK
Organisational culture (Organisational Level)	• Masculinised workplace culture • Gender bias in promotion and leadership allocation • Merit-based and biased advancement practices • Exclusion from strategic decision-making spaces • Limited inclusivity and representation • Barriers to growth and gender disparity	Social Role Theory (Organisational Level-Lens)	• Role Incongruity Theory • Implicit Bias Theory • Glass Ceiling Theory (structural barriers to advancement)	<i>Social Role Theory explains how gendered roles, expectations and norms are reproduced within organisational cultures, shaping access to leadership opportunities.</i> <i>Institutional Theory explains how embedded norms, values and policies can either perpetuate or challenge gendered inequities.</i> <i>Glass Ceiling Theory highlights structural barriers that limit women's progression despite qualifications and merit.</i>

The participants were asked to reflect on the prevailing organisational culture within the manufacturing industry, particularly in relation to gender inclusivity and diversity. They were invited to share their perceptions of how this culture either supports or restricts the progression of women into managerial and executive roles. Additionally, the participants were encouraged to identify specific organisational policies, practices, or cultural norms that they believe have a notable influence, whether positive or negative on the advancement of women in leadership positions.

The key findings from the interviews revealed several critical focus areas and corresponding strategies to address gender disparities in leadership within the manufacturing industry. The participants identified a range of sub-themes influencing women's progression into managerial and executive roles. Firstly, concerns were raised around merit-based and biased advancement practices, prompting the recommendation for unbiased appraisal systems to ensure fair recognition and career progression. These concerns reflect broader research that highlights how traditional performance evaluations often carry hidden gender biases that disadvantage women (Zawedde & Bhorat, 2022).

The theme of limited inclusivity and representation underscored the need to identify and actively remove systemic obstacles, such as stereotypical role expectations and lack of support mechanisms. A strong emphasis was also placed on cultivating an inclusive organisational culture, with management playing a vital role in fostering gender equity through inclusive leadership training and accountability (Deloitte, 2021; ILO, 2022; Haque *et al.*, 2024).

Furthermore, representation and managerial preferences were seen as influential factors in advancement outcomes, highlighting the need to audit decision-making processes to ensure they are free from bias. In addressing gender diversity and representation, participants advocated for the implementation of gender diversity targets and improved policy alignment with national and organisational diversity frameworks; an approach supported by recent global best practices (PwC, 2021; UN Women, 2023).

Additionally, exclusion from strategic decision-making spaces were noted, reinforcing the need to redesign performance tools and run awareness campaigns to combat these biases. Finally, broader barriers to growth and gender disparity were discussed.

The participants recommended strategies, such as the use of data analytics to track disparities, development of mentorship and reskilling programmes, implementation of Individual Development Plans (IDPs), and internal mobility initiatives, to support women's upward career mobility. These strategies align with the most recent evidence promoting structural interventions that enable equitable career development (McIlongo & Strydom, 2021; CIPD, 2023).

6.2.1 Conclusions related to Objective 1

The insights gathered from the interviews highlight a complex interplay of factors that influence the advancement of women into managerial and executive roles within the manufacturing industry. The thematic findings ranging from masculinised workplace culture, gender bias in promotion and leadership allocation, Merit-based and biased advancement practices, exclusion from strategic decision-making spaces, limited inclusivity and representation underscore the multifaceted nature of gender equity challenges. These findings have been consolidated into a practical and targeted framework that operates at various interlinked levels within the meso-level framework figure.

At the organisational level, cultural norms, internal policies, and leadership behaviours directly shape the opportunities available to women. Strategies, such as unbiased appraisal systems, inclusive leadership training, and gender diversity targets, are central to shifting these organisational dynamics. At the individual level, initiatives like mentorship, reskilling, and Individual Development Plans (IDPs) empower women to navigate and overcome structural barriers. Meanwhile, the societal level is reflected in broader diversity policies, awareness campaigns, and the prevailing gender narratives that influence workplace practices and perceptions.

Together, these levels form a comprehensive meso-level framework that recognises the interconnectedness of culture, policy, and individual experience. This framework not only responds to the immediate organisational realities but also supports long-term, systemic transformation by aligning efforts across societal, individual, and organisational dimensions. As such, it serves as a strategic tool for fostering inclusive leadership and advancing gender equity within the manufacturing industry and beyond.

6.3 KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK: OBJECTIVE 2

Table 6.2 provides a summary of the assessment and a breakdown of the analysis based on the framework used. It also categorises themes into sub-themes, which include focus areas, key strategies, and expected outcomes, in line with the concept of the TM framework.

Table 6.2: Key components of the framework related to Objective 2

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK: RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2				
STEREOTYPES, IDENTITY & SELF-PERCEPTIONS (Individual-Level Dimension)				
FRAMEWORK DIMENSIONS (From Integrated Theoretical Framework)	KEY BARRIERS IDENTIFIED (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)	SUPPORTING THEORIES (INTEGRATED)	HOW THEORY EXPLAINS THE FRAMEWORK
Stereotypes, identity & self-perceptions (Individual-Level Dimension)	• Stereotyping and unconscious bias • Accent-based bias and racial preferences • Reduced self-confidence and visibility • Work-life balance and responsibilities • Caregiving pressures • Limited leadership exposure and mentoring	SOCIAL ROLE THEORY (Individual-Level Lens)	• Role Incongruity Theory • Double Bind Theory • Implicit Bias Theory • Expectation States Theory	<i>Social Role Theory explains how personal factors (cognition, identity, self-efficacy) interact with social influences to shape behaviours and career outcomes. Role Incongruity Theory explains the penalty women face when leadership roles conflict with societal gender expectations. Expectation States Theory shows how expectations about women's roles influence opportunities and evaluations. Self-Perception Theory explains how feedback and experiences shape confidence and aspirations.</i>

The participants were asked to reflect on their experiences and observations regarding gender stereotypes in the manufacturing industry. Many noted that stereotypes about women's capabilities, such as the assumptions that women lack technical competence, physical strength, or leadership qualities have affected career advancement opportunities. These biases often manifest in limited access to high-visibility projects, slower promotions, or exclusion from the informal networks that are critical for career progression.

The participants also shared specific instances where gender stereotypes influenced workplace interactions and decision-making. The examples included women being overlooked for leadership roles, having their input undervalued in meetings, or facing resistance when asserting authority in male-dominated environments. These dynamics reinforced a workplace culture that subtly, or at times, overtly hindered women's upward mobility. Such experiences align with recent findings that unconscious bias and gendered assumptions continue to affect women's professional progression, especially in industries like manufacturing where leadership remains male-dominated (Schnierle *et al.*, 2019).

When asked about organisational responses, the participants identified a mix of formal and informal initiatives. Some organisations had introduced diversity and inclusion (D&I) programmes, gender sensitivity training, or mentorship opportunities aimed at supporting women's career growth. However, the effectiveness and consistency of these initiatives varied; and in some cases, the efforts were perceived as tokenistic or symbolic rather than transformative. This reflects global trends where D&I strategies are implemented unevenly, often lacking measurable impact or long-term commitment (WEF, 2022).

One of the central themes identified was that of stereotypes hindering women's advancement, with issues such as accent or racial bias, reduced self-confidence and visibility, and stereotyping and unconscious bias affecting career progression. Strategies to address these challenges included implementing diversity sensitivity training, offering cross-cultural education, and promoting inclusive hiring and performance management practices (Cross *et al.*, 2023; Curini *et al.*, 2023).

Another critical theme was work-family conflict, focusing on how personal and family obligations influence women's career decisions. Sub-themes included societal

expectations around caregiving and structural barriers to work-life integration. Strategies to mitigate these issues included flexible work arrangements, strong parental leave policies, and leadership development programmes that support holistic well-being (Zamarro & Prados, 2021).

Finally, caregiving pressures emerged as a significant barrier. These included beliefs about women's physical or emotional capacity for leadership and the persistent glass ceiling effect. To counter these stereotypes, the participants emphasised the need to challenge gender norms, increase female leadership visibility, and implement structured advancement programmes that guarantee fair access to leadership opportunities (Gursoy & Maier, 2023).

6.3.1 Conclusions related to Objective 2

The findings above highlight the multifaceted nature of the barriers that women face in progressing into managerial and executive roles within the manufacturing industry. At the individual level, these challenges are shaped by personal experiences, with stereotypes, workplace perceptions, and the struggle to balance professional responsibilities with societal and familial expectations. Stereotypes about women's capabilities, whether rooted in unconscious bias, cultural norms, or perceptions of physical and emotional strength, undermine confidence, limit access to growth opportunities, and reinforce gendered career paths.

Work-family conflict issues further compound these challenges, as women are often expected to manage caregiving roles alongside demanding work environments. These personal and social pressures intersect with professional ambitions, creating a complex web of barriers at the individual level. However, targeted strategies, such as inclusive hiring practices, diversity sensitivity training, flexible work policies, and visible female leadership, provide meaningful avenues for change.

These insights contribute to the individual-level framework by emphasising how personal identity, lived experiences, and interpersonal dynamics within the workplace directly influence women's career progression. Both organisational support and intentional personal development pathways are required to address these issues to empower women and create equitable opportunities in manufacturing leadership.

6.4 KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK: OBJECTIVE 3

Table 6.3 provides a summary of the assessment and a breakdown of the analysis according to the framework used. It categorises the thematic analysis into sub-themes, highlighting the focus areas and key strategies and expected outcomes within the TM framework.

Table 6.3: Key components of the framework related to Objective 3

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK: RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 3				
TALENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND EFFECITIVENESS (Organisational-Level Dimension)				
FRAMEWORK DIMENSIONS (From Integrated Theoretical Framework)	KEY BARRIERS IDENTIFIED (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)	SUPPORTING THEORIES (INTEGRATED)	HOW THEORY EXPLAINS THE FRAMEWORK
3 TALENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND EFFECITIVENESS (Organisational-Level Dimension)	• Bias in recruitment and promotion systems • Unequal access to development opportunities • Limited succession planning for women • Male-dominated talent pipelines • Limited mentorship, sponsorship and leadership initiatives • Lack of transparent performance management • Limited career progression pathways	HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY (Organisational-Level Lens)	• Glass Ceiling Theory • Tokensim • Transformational Leadership Theory	<i>Human Capital Theory posits that investment in skills, development and advancement enhances productivity and advancement potential. Talent Management Theory explains how effective systems attract, develop and retain talent, and suggests that developing women leaders builds unique organisational capabilities. Social Theory highlights organisations invest in women, commitment and performance follow.</i>

The participants were asked a series of questions aimed at exploring the current TM strategies within their organisations that support the advancement of women into executive roles. They were first invited to provide an overview of the TM practices currently in place, and how these are being used to promote women into leadership positions. Following this, the participants were asked to elaborate on how these strategies are specifically tailored to address the unique career progression needs of women in managerial and executive roles. Lastly, the participants were encouraged to share their insights on how women within the organisation perceive the effectiveness of these strategies, including any feedback, anecdotes, or general sentiments expressed during discussions with colleagues.

The data gathered from the participants was organised into the main theme, Talent management practices & effectiveness (Organisational-Level) that reflect the current practices and challenges being experienced in advancing women into executive roles within the manufacturing industry.

The theme, biased recruitment and promotion systems, focused on the lack of tailored development opportunities for women. Key strategies identified under this theme include the development of targeted programmes for women, the establishment of sponsorship networks, and the identification of high-potential female talent. These findings align with recent research emphasising the value of intentional development programmes, leadership pipelines, and inclusive sponsorship initiatives in advancing women leaders (Hajam & John, 2023).

The theme, limited succession planning for women, encompassed the barriers that women face in leadership progression. These included limited access to leadership roles, restricted growth opportunities, development gaps, and general progression barriers. To address these challenges, the participants noted strategies such as succession planning, the use of coaching and feedback loops, and the implementation of targeted leadership tracks. These strategies are consistent with studies highlighting the importance of inclusive succession planning and structured development frameworks to remove systemic barriers (Moraka, 2024).

The theme, Unequal access to development opportunities, examined systematic approaches to development and advancement. Focus areas included development promotion, the use of Personal Development Plans, and tailored strategies for

promoting high performers. The effective strategies that were reported included integrating Individual Development Plans (IDPs) with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), conducting regular performance reviews, and establishing clear career pathways to support the career growth of women in managerial and executive positions. This reflects the best practices recommended in recent human capital trends reports, which emphasised the integration of measurable development tools and equitable talent management frameworks (Zhang & Nesbit, 2018).

6.4.1 Conclusion related to Objective 3

The talent management practices and effectiveness (Organisational-Level) outlined above integrates a variety of critical themes that are essential for fostering an inclusive and high-performing workforce. The framework incorporates key areas, such as organisational culture, gender dynamics, stereotypes, intersectionality, talent management, recruitment, retention, and performance measurement. These themes not only align with the goals of enhancing individual and organisational development but also reflect a broader societal understanding of inclusion and diversity.

This framework can be situated within the meso-level framework, as it operates at the intersection of three levels, namely, societal, individual, and organisational. At the societal level, the framework addresses macro-level issues such as cultural norms, societal stereotypes, and the impact of gender and intersectionality on workforce dynamics. The individual level focuses on the development and performance of employees, considering personal attributes, experiences, and challenges that influence career progression and job satisfaction. Finally, at the organisational level, the framework emphasises the creation of supportive structures, policies, and processes that foster a culture of inclusion, equity, and talent development across all organisational layers.

By recognising the interconnection between these levels, the Talent and Development Framework provide a comprehensive framework for driving meaningful change in organisations and society, ultimately contributing to sustainable organisational growth and individual empowerment.

6.5 KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK: OBJECTIVE 4

Table 6.4 provides a summary of the assessment and a breakdown of the analysis based on the aspects of the framework utilised, and presents a category of thematic analysis, divided into sub-themes such as focus areas and key strategies and expected outcomes within the TM framework

Table 6.4: Key components of the framework related to Objective 4

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK: RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 4				
INTERSECTIONALITY FACTORS (Societal-Level Dimension)				
FRAMEWORK DIMENSIONS (From Integrated Theoretical Framework)	KEY BARRIERS IDENTIFIED (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (PRIMARY LENS)	SUPPORTING THEORIES (INTEGRATED)	HOW THEORY EXPLAINS THE FRAMEWORK
4 INTERSECTIONALITY FACTORS (Societal-Level)	• Intersectionality of gender, race, and ethnicity • Gender and race overlap and unique struggles of Black women • Structural inequality and systemic barriers • Workplace and industry challenges • Socio-economic disadvantages affecting access • Cultural expectations affecting women's advancement	INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY (Societal-Level Lens)	• Feminist Theory • Social Role Theory	<i>Intersectionality Theory explains how overlapping identities (gender, race, class, ethnicity) create unique experiences of advantage and disadvantage. Feminist Theory emphasises that gendered power relations shape women's access to opportunities and resources within society.</i>

The participants were asked to reflect on how the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, and other identity factors influences advancement opportunities for women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry. The focus was on exploring how various aspects of identity, such as race and ethnicity, intersect with gender in shaping career progression within the organisation. The participants were encouraged to share their insights on the complex dynamics at play, highlighting the unique challenges and advantages faced by women from diverse backgrounds in pursuing leadership roles. This inquiry aimed to uncover the nuanced experiences of women in the workplace, offering a deeper understanding of the barriers and opportunities related to career advancement in the context of intersectionality.

Key findings from the study revealed the main theme that influence the advancement of women in managerial and executive roles within the manufacturing industry. The intersectional factors (societal level) highlighted the compounded impact of gender, race, and ethnicity on women's career progression. The participants emphasised the need for intersectionality training, the creation of equitable opportunities, and the integration of diverse representation within organisational policies to address overlapping disadvantages (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019; Nash & Piccinini, 2020).

The second theme, structural inequality, pointed to persistent structural and institutional inequalities, as well as industry-specific barriers that hinder women's advancement. Strategies to address these challenges included comprehensive systems reviews, revising existing policies and practices, and conducting industry benchmarking to align with best practices (Ng & Rumens, 2021; Choudhury, 2022).

The third theme, socio-economic barriers, shed light on how identity and social roles, as well as transportation and broader socio-economic factors, affect women's ability to access and thrive in leadership roles. The participants advocated for support mechanisms, such as stipends, accessibility planning, and greater consideration of the lived realities of women, to ensure fairness and sustained support throughout their career journeys (ILO, 2021; Mungai & Bayat, 2023).

These findings reflect the complexity of gendered advancement and align with the meso-level framework, which connects individual, organisational, and societal dynamics. At the individual level, women's identities and lived experiences influence how they navigate leadership pathways. At the organisational level, workplace

structures, cultures, and policies play a critical role in enabling or constraining advancement. At the societal level, prevailing socio-economic conditions and cultural norms shape opportunities and perceptions of leadership. A meso-level approach is therefore essential in designing interventions that are contextually relevant and systemically transformative.

6.5.1 Conclusions related to Objective 4

The findings underscore the multifaceted barriers that women face in advancing to managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry, shaped by the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic factors. These challenges are not isolated but rather embedded within broader systemic, structural, and social contexts. The themes identified racial and gender intersectionality, structural inequality, socio-economic barriers, patriarchal social norms Cultural expectations affecting women's advancement, which highlighted the importance of targeted strategies, such as intersectionality training, equitable policy development, systems reviews, and accessibility planning.

Importantly, these findings align with the meso-level framework, which bridges individual, organisational, and societal influences. At the individual level, women's identities and lived experiences shape their career trajectories; at the organisational level, institutional policies and workplace culture impact opportunities for advancement; and at the societal level, broader norms and socio-economic structures influence access and equity. Together, these insights point to the need for holistic, multi-level interventions that acknowledge and address the interconnected factors affecting women's progression into leadership roles within the manufacturing industry.

6.6 KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK: OBJECTIVE 5

Table 6.5 provides a summary of the assessment and a breakdown of the analysis through aspects of the framework utilised. It also categorises themes into sub-themes, which include focus areas, key strategies, and expected outcomes, in line with the concept of the TM framework.

Table 6.5 Key components of the framework related to Objective 5

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK: RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 5 EFFICIENT TALENT MANAGEMENT (Integrative Level Dimension)				
FRAMEWORK DIMENSIONS (From Integrated Theoretical Framework)	KEY BARRIERS IDENTIFIED (From Findings)	CORE THEORY (INTEGRATIVE LENS)	SUPPORTING THEORIES (INTEGRATED)	HOW THEORY EXPLAINS THE FRAMEWORK
5. EFFICIENT TALENT MANAGEMENT (Integrative -Level Dimension)	• Weak implementation of transformation policies • Lack of organisational accountability • Poor integration between HR systems and leadership goals	HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY (Integrative Lens)	• Transformational Leadership Theory • Feminist Theory	<i>Transformational Leadership Theory emphasises visionary, inclusive leadership that drives cultural change and inspires sustainable transformation.</i>

The participants were asked to share how the manufacturing industry develops and executes an efficient talent management to support the advancement of women into managerial and executive roles. They were prompted to discuss how their organisation approaches talent management, including the specific components of the framework implemented. Further inquiry focused on the gender-specific dimension of this framework, particularly how they proactively address the challenges faced by women and contribute to their professional development. The participants were also asked whether their organisations have dedicated programmes, initiatives, or policies aimed at advancing women's careers. Additionally, they were invited to reflect on any ongoing assessments or modifications made to improve the effectiveness of the talent management, highlighting its adaptability and continuous improvement.

The main theme of efficient talent management (integrative level) centred on leadership and employee growth, emphasising the importance of active learning and development programmes that incorporate regular feedback mechanisms. Research shows that employees who receive consistent, meaningful feedback are significantly more engaged and more likely to perform at higher levels (Gallup, 2020). These programmes are most effective when aligned with leadership development goals and supported by structured initiatives such as 360-degree feedback, coaching, and personal development plans. A critical issue identified within this theme was the presence of training barriers, which commonly include time constraints, lack of access to resources, managerial disengagement, and resistance to change. To address these obstacles, organisations are encouraged to conduct thorough Training Needs Analyses (TNA), embed flexible learning options like microlearning or e-learning, and secure active management support.

Noe (2020) and Garavan *et al.* (2012) emphasised that ensuring development continuity requires strategic alignment between organisational goals and individual growth pathways, underpinned by regular progress tracking and evaluation.

Under the theme of weak implementation of transformation policies, the focus shifted to inclusive hiring practices and strategic employee engagement mechanisms. Inclusive recruitment involves actively identifying and removing biases in the hiring process by using structured interviews, blind CV reviews, and broadening the platforms used for job advertising to reach a diverse candidate pool.

According to SHRM (2022) and McKinsey & Co. (2020), organisations that practise inclusive hiring are more innovative and financially successful, benefiting from a broader range of perspectives and experiences. Additionally, exit interviews were highlighted as a valuable tool for gathering actionable insights to improve workplace culture and retention strategies. These efforts are further strengthened through the implementation of systems for employee recognition and reward, which are vital for boosting morale, increasing job satisfaction, and enhancing organisational loyalty. Armstrong and Taylor (2023) noted that meaningful recognition, whether monetary or non-monetary, can significantly improve employee retention outcomes.

The final theme, Poor integration between HR systems and leadership goals, explored the significance of maintaining a transparent and equitable Organisational Performance Review (OPR) process. A fair performance management system ensures all employees are evaluated consistently, with an emphasis on clarity, inclusivity, and developmental feedback. A key strategy involves the use of representation dashboards to monitor promotion trends, diversity statistics, and other equity-related metrics. These tools support evidence-based decision-making and help track organisational progress in achieving gender and racial parity.

Bourke and Dillon (2018) argued that performance tracking systems, when paired with diversity monitoring, promote equitable career progression and help close systemic opportunity gaps. Additionally, the application of frameworks like the Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 1996) allows organisations to align employee performance with strategic outcomes while reinforcing accountability and transparency.

6.6.1 Conclusions related to Objective 5

The theme under Efficient Talent Management (Integrative-Level) collectively illustrates a comprehensive approach to advancing women into leadership roles within the manufacturing industry. These strategies emphasise not only organisational commitment to inclusive growth but also the need for structured feedback mechanisms, the removal of developmental barriers, and the continuous tracking of progress through transparent and equitable systems. Table 6.6 shows the overall key components of the framework. The implementation of inclusive hiring practices, recognition programmes, and representation tracking further strengthens

organisational readiness to support gender equity. A comprehensive and integrated strategy for promoting women into executive management roles in South Africa's industrial sector is the Talent Management Framework. The approach uses organisational, individuals, societal, and environmental factors to show how interrelated opportunities and barriers operating at multiple levels impact women's leadership advancement. The framework integrates Social Role Theory, Human Capital Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and other supporting theoretical views to highlight the significance of systemic transformation above single initiatives. The suggested strategic actions aim to create inclusive organisational cultures, strengthen leadership pipelines, confront gendered norms, and address structural injustices. Ultimately, the framework offers companies that wish to enhance gender parity, cultivate female leadership potential, and encourage long-term change in the manufacturing industry a useful and theoretically grounded road map.

Table 6.6: Overall key components of the framework

Framework Dimensions (From Integrated Theoretical Framework)	Key Barriers Identified (From Findings)	Core Theories (Primary Lens)
1. ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE	· Masculinised workplace culture	Social Role Theory (Organisational-Level)
(Organisational-Level)	· Gender bias in promotion and leadership allocation · Merit-based and biased advancement practices · Exclusion from strategic decision-making spaces · Limited inclusivity and representation · Barriers to growth and gender disparity	Explains how gendered roles, expectations and norms within organisations shape structures, behaviours and opportunities, creating advantages for men and barriers for women.
2. STEREOTYPES, IDENTITY & SELF-PERCEPTIONS	· Stereotyping and unconscious bias	Social Role Theory (Individual-Level Lens)
(Individual-Level)	· Accent-based bias and racial preferences · Reduced self-confidence and visibility · Work-life balance and responsibilities · Caregiving pressures · Limited leadership exposure and mentoring	Explains how internalised gender norms and stereotypes shape women's self-perceptions, confidence, aspirations and leadership behaviours.
3. TALENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES & EFFECTIVENESS	· Bias in recruitment and promotion systems	Human Capital Theory (Organisational-Level Lens)
(Organisational-Level)	· Unequal access to development opportunities · Limited succession planning for women · Male-dominated talent pipelines · Limited mentorship, sponsorship and leadership initiatives · Lack of transparent performance management · Limited career progression pathways	Explains how investment in skills, knowledge and development enhances human capital and drives individual capability and organisational performance.
4. INTERSECTIONAL FACTORS	· Intersectionality of gender, race and ethnicity	Intersectionality Theory (Societal-Level Lens)
(Societal-Level)	· Gender and race overlap and unique struggles · Structural inequality and systemic barriers · Workplace and industry challenges · Socio-economic disadvantages affecting access · Cultural expectations affecting women's advancement	Explains how overlapping identities create
5. EFFICIENT TALENT MANAGEMENT (Integrative - Level Dimension)	· Weak implementation of transformation policies	Human Capital Theory (Integrative Lens)
(Integrative Systems Dimension)	· Lack of organisational accountability · Poor integration between HR systems and leadership goals	Explains how integrated systems, investment and strategic alignment create value and drive sustainable transformation.

6.7 PROPOSED TALENT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Figure 6.1 illustrates the talent management framework derived from the participants' responses. The proposed talent management framework for the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions in the South African manufacturing sector proposes a structural disruption approach to address gender inequality and leadership exclusion within manufacturing.

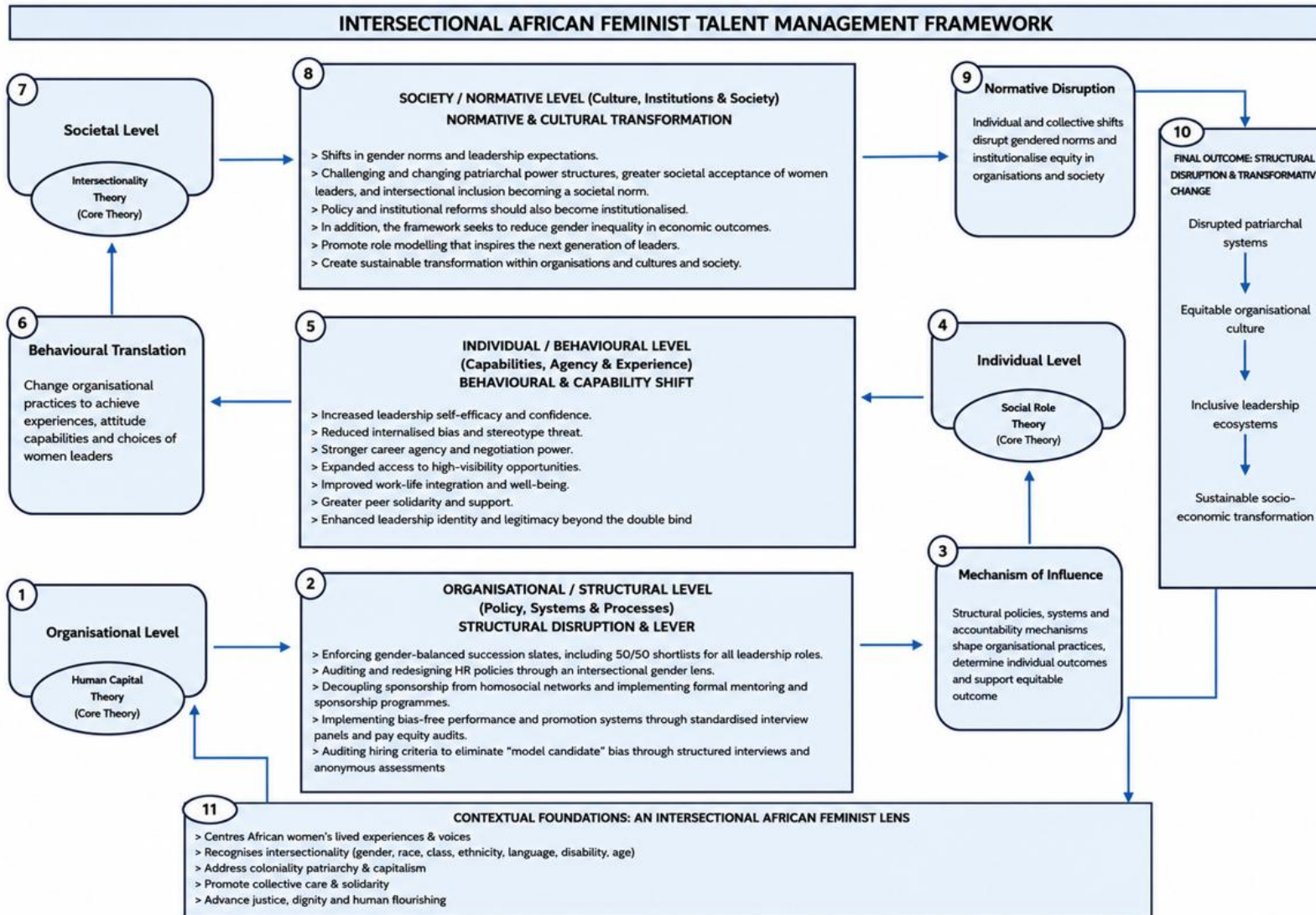


Figure 6.1: Proposed Talent Management Framework

Source: Researcher's own compilation

The proposed framework in Figure 6.1 is derived from the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 3 (Figure 3.3) and incorporates the key components identified through the study findings. It is informed by the findings associated with each research objective presented in Chapter 6 (Tables 6.1 – 6.5), while also drawing on the principles of intersectional African feminist lens and organisational transformation practices. Together, these elements provide the foundation for a comprehensive talent management framework aimed at supporting the advancement of women into executive management positions within the South African manufacturing industry. The outcome of the framework is structural disruption and transformational change. The framework begins with disrupting patriarchal systems, organisational culture, and women leaders' inclusive leadership ecosystems, and then moves toward the sustainable socio-economic transformation we want to see within the manufacturing industry.

6.7.1 Conclusions and discussions related to the proposed framework

The framework is built from the multilevel interventions as noted in Figure 6.1, and it illustrates how talent management interventions operate across organisational, individual, and societal levels to facilitate women's advancement into executive leadership in the South African manufacturing sector. It integrates Human Capital Theory, Social Role Theory, and Intersectionality Theory within an Intersectional African Feminist lens.

Step 1. Organisational Level (Human Capital Theory)

The framework begins at the organisational level, which is underpinned by Human Capital Theory. This theory suggests that organisations create leadership capability by investing in people through effective policies, systems, and processes.

At this level, organisations are encouraged to implement structural interventions such as gender-balanced succession planning, inclusive recruitment and promotion, hr policy redesign, formal mentoring and sponsorship programmes, fair performance management systems. These interventions create the structural foundation needed to support women's leadership advancement.

Step 2. Organisational / Structural Level – Structural Disruption & Lever

These organisational interventions are translated into structural reforms that challenge existing organisational practices. Examples include enforcing gender-balanced succession slates, auditing hr policies through an intersectional gender lens, decoupling sponsorship from informal homosocial networks, implementing structured interviews and anonymous assessments to reduce bias. These reforms are intended to disrupt systemic barriers embedded within organisational structures.

Step 3. Mechanism of Influence

Structural reforms become the mechanism of influence by changing organisational systems, policies, and accountability mechanisms. These mechanisms: Reduce institutional barriers. Improve equitable decision-making. Promote transparency. Support fair leadership opportunities. In essence, organisational structures begin influencing more equitable leadership outcomes.

Step 4. Individual Level (Social Role Theory)

The framework then moves to the individual level, which is guided by Social Role Theory. This theory explains how gender roles and societal expectations influence women's: Confidence. Leadership identity, Career aspirations, Behaviour within organisations. As organisational barriers are reduced, women are better positioned to develop their leadership capabilities.

Step 5. Individual / Behavioural Level – Behavioural & Capability Shift

Supportive organisational conditions lead to behavioural change. Women experience: Increased leadership self-efficacy, reduced internalised bias, stronger career agency, improved work-life integration, greater access to leadership opportunities, enhanced leadership identity. These behavioural shifts strengthen women's readiness for executive leadership.

Step 6. Behavioural Translation

The behavioural changes are then translated into workplace practice.

Women begin to: participate more actively in leadership, influence organisational decision-making, demonstrate leadership confidence, become role models for future women leaders, behavioural change therefore reinforces organisational transformation.

Step 7. Societal Level (Intersectionality Theory)

The framework then extends to the societal level, guided by Intersectionality Theory.

This theory recognises that women's advancement is influenced by overlapping systems of inequality, including gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability, cultural norms. Leadership advancement therefore requires addressing broader societal structures, not only organisational practices.

Step 8. Society / Normative Level – Normative & Cultural Transformation

As organisational and individual changes accumulate, broader societal transformation begins. This stage focuses on changing gender norms, challenging patriarchal structures, institutionalising inclusive policies, promoting women role models, creating sustainable transformation within organisations and society. This represents a shift from organisational change to wider cultural change.

Step 9. Normative Disruption

The transformed organisational and societal norms begin disrupting long-standing inequalities. This includes disrupting: patriarchal norms, institutional discrimination, gender stereotypes, unequal leadership expectations. Normative disruption creates more inclusive organisational and societal environments.

Step 10. Final Outcome: Structural Disruption & Transformative Change

The framework culminates in transformative change. The anticipated outcomes include disrupted patriarchal systems, equitable organisational cultures, inclusive leadership ecosystems, sustainable socio-economic transformation. This demonstrates that sustainable women's leadership advancement requires coordinated structural, behavioural, and societal transformation.

Step 11. Contextual Foundations: An Intersectional African Feminist Lens

The entire framework is grounded in an Intersectional African Feminist Lens, which provides the philosophical and contextual foundation. This lens ensures that every intervention: centres African women lived experiences and voices, recognises intersecting identities such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, language, age, and disability, challenges coloniality, patriarchy, and capitalism, promotes collective care and solidarity, advances justice, dignity, and human flourishing. Rather than

functioning as a separate step, this foundation supports and informs every component of the framework.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

As the final chapter, Chapter 7 is centred on conclusions, contributions, and recommendations. It starts with an outline of the study's objectives, followed by an overview of the findings from the post-data-collection analysis. Then, the chapter presents conclusions based on the objectives outlined in Chapter 1, supported by the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 2, and ultimately, by the data gathered during the in-depth interviews.

The first conclusion highlights the importance of culture in the manufacturing industry in promoting women into managerial and executive roles. The second conclusion emphasises how stereotypes about women's abilities and roles hinder their progress into these positions within the industry. The third conclusion examines talent management initiatives aimed at supporting women's advancement and explores how women perceive these efforts. The fourth conclusion considers the impact of intersectionality, covering gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors, on opportunities for women to advance into managerial and executive roles in manufacturing. The fifth conclusion underscores the significance of effective talent management in helping women reach managerial and executive positions.

Finally, the study's conclusions are based on the proposed meso-level research framework, which is derived from the findings outlined in Chapter 6, and offers guidance for applying this talent management framework to support the advancement of women into executive roles within the South African manufacturing industry.

7.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY AND FINDINGS

The primary aim of the study was to investigate the factors that impede women's progress in reaching managerial or executive positions in South Africa's manufacturing sector, and to analyse how these factors vary within cultural, systemic, and organisational contexts. The study had five secondary research objectives, which

formed part of the data-collection process through semi-structured, qualitative interviews, providing insights into the advancement of women in South African manufacturing industry. Twenty senior executives, directors, and managers were invited to participate in the interview, offering insights on talent management for the advancement of women in South Africa's manufacturing industry. The questions developed for the interview process were based on the five objectives of the study.

The study's results were organised into five primary objectives that aimed to address the central research question and establish the approach for the meso-level framework for advancing women to executive and managerial positions in the manufacturing industry. To achieve this, the study used a comparative analysis of women's experiences to identify commonalities and differences in the challenges faced by women seeking managerial or executive roles in the industry, guided by the Nkomo and Ngambi 2009 meso-level framework.

Through qualitative insights from participants, it became clear that although efforts to promote gender equity have increased visibility, the structural and cultural barriers continue to restrict women's progression into leadership roles. These findings formed the basis for the conclusions presented in this chapter, which details the factors impeding women's advancement to executive management positions in the South African manufacturing industry.

7.3 CONCLUSIONS FROM THE FULL STUDY

The study's conclusions are presented in five sub-sections below, which correspond to the five objectives outlined in Chapter 1. These objectives were addressed through data collection and analysis, and the outcomes were evaluated in consideration of the factors that hinder women from advancing to executive management roles in the case of the South African manufacturing industry, to contribute to the theoretical development of women's advancement in the manufacturing industry body of knowledge.

7.3.1 Impact of culture

This sub-section presents the conclusions related to the impact of culture in the manufacturing industry on the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions.

The current study found that the manufacturing industry's organisational culture remains male-dominated, with informal norms and rigid hierarchies that often disadvantage women. While the organisation has implemented diversity and inclusion policies, their execution is inconsistent and lacks measurable results. Cultural resistance to change, limited female representation in decision-making roles, and the undervaluing of women's leadership potential remain significant barriers. Additionally, this industry has not yet demonstrated sufficient flexibility to support women in managerial and executive positions, given these complex challenges. Furthermore, the organisational culture in manufacturing acts as a major obstacle, restricting the career advancement of skilled women (Mwashita *et al.*, 2020).

Mabokela and Magubane (2022) emphasised that men and women perceive organisational events differently. These differences encompass experiences of inequality in career growth, access to opportunities, lower expectations for women, variations in organisational culture, unequal support, differing views on performance assessments, and contrasting perspectives on the organisation's history (Kabeer *et al.*, 2021).

The research shows that although organisational culture is often seen as neutral or inclusive, it is deeply influenced by gender biases and systemic inequalities, which impact opportunities for women's career progression. Nguyen (2019) also argued that organisational culture can influence women's rise to senior management roles in manufacturing. The participants' narratives revealed that despite some progress through policy reforms and diversity efforts, patriarchal norms and institutional exclusions continue to shape everyday experiences in South African manufacturing industries (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018).

A prominent theme that emerged is the ongoing under-representation of women in executive and decision-making roles, often reinforced by the so-called 'glass ceiling' effect and the 'broken rung' at the first level of leadership promotion (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Even when formal policies promote gender equality, their implementation and effectiveness often fall short, especially beyond middle management. The participants noted that gender diversity is frequently viewed as a compliance requirement rather than being fully integrated into the organisational value system.

Additionally, performance-based biases, limited access to mentorship, and exclusion from informal networks further marginalise women, even when they have equal or better qualifications and performance. Women receive less actionable feedback and are judged more on personality traits than on leadership potential. These systemic practices impede women's professional growth and lead to ongoing dissatisfaction and disengagement (Vinh *et al.*, 2022).

Crucially, while there is an increased focus on racial representation, gender equity often seems secondary to many other organisational priorities, reflecting an imbalanced approach to diversity and transformation (Seale *et al.*, 2021b). Moreover, the participants revealed that women frequently experience emotional labour, sacrifices in their personal lives, and feelings of tokenism, which are rarely recognised in organisational policies or leadership structures (Bain & Company, 2021).

7.3.2 Stereotypes about women's abilities and roles

This sub-section presents the conclusions related to how stereotypes about women's abilities and roles affect their progression into managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry.

The participants shared how deeply rooted the prevailing stereotypes about women's abilities, especially regarding their leadership style, emotional resilience, and decision-making authority, have negatively affected their career paths. Such stereotypes appear in workplace interactions, performance reviews, and selection for strategic projects, reinforcing the idea that leadership is predominantly male (O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021).

The current study has shed light on the complex interaction between organisational culture, gender dynamics, societal expectations, and institutional practices that influence women's experiences and opportunities in the workplace, especially in leadership roles within male-dominated industries like manufacturing (Larsson & Alvinus, 2020). The reflections presented by the participants and a review of the supporting literature showed that, although some progress has been made toward gender equity, significant barriers still exist.

Cultural characteristics of the workplace, such as shared values, norms, and behaviours, significantly influence inclusion, representation, and leadership pathways.

However, ingrained stereotypes and unconscious biases continue to hinder women's progress, often reinforcing the assumption that men are more suited for leadership or high-pressure roles (Bahn *et al.*, 2020). These biases appear in hiring, promotions, and performance reviews, creating an unfair playing field for equally qualified women.

Work-life conflict emerged as key themes, showing how caregiving expectations disproportionately impact women. These duties often limit their career advancement, cause them to take part-time jobs or career breaks, and foster perceptions of reduced commitment or availability (Zamarro & Prados, 2021). The participants emphasised that these realities are not just personal choices but are shaped by structural norms, societal expectations, and workplace cultures that have not fully adapted to the needs of a diverse workforce.

Despite these challenges, there is also a clear story of progress. Many organisations are making intentional efforts to promote women, challenge stereotypes, and implement inclusive policies such as parental leave (Ardener *et al.*, 2021), childcare support, and flexible work arrangements. These efforts are vital not only for achieving gender equality but also for fostering more innovative, resilient, and high-performing organisations.

The findings reveal the complex and persistent web of gender-based challenges faced by women in a male-dominated industry, particularly within leadership and managerial roles. Themes, such as stereotypes, perceptions of competence, and the enduring presence of the glass ceiling, highlight how deeply embedded cultural norms, and institutional biases continue to shape women's experiences. Despite progress in gender equity policies, women often still navigate environments where they must consistently validate their capabilities, negotiate exclusionary networks, and confront assumptions that question their leadership potential (Kabeer *et al.*, 2021).

The participants' narratives reinforce the academic literature, highlighting the emotional and psychological toll of these challenges. They explained internal pressures, lack of support at higher levels, and the resilience needed to overcome informal barriers such as exclusion from 'inner circles'. These insights emphasise that self-perception and career growth are shaped not only by organisational structures but also by everyday interpersonal interactions and cultural expectations.

The literature supports these lived experiences, confirming that stereotypes linking leadership to masculinity (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), unequal access to mentoring and networks (Ibarra, 1993; Ragins & Kram, 2007), and ongoing bias in perceptions of competence (Heilman, 2012; Larsson & Alvinus, 2020) all contribute to an environment where women's career advancement remains hindered.

7.3.3 Talent management initiatives

This sub-section presents the conclusions related to the talent management initiatives that have been implemented to support the advancement of women in the manufacturing industry, and to examine how women perceive them.

The study identified various talent management strategies in use, such as mentorship programmes, succession planning, and diversity training. However, these were often viewed as merely symbolic unless supported by structural reforms. Women found some strategies helpful but stressed that without specific development opportunities and accountability measures, their effectiveness is limited.

The importance of mentorship appeared as a key factor in career development. Mentorship offers not only guidance and support but also promotes networking and learning opportunities that help individuals, especially women, navigate organisational obstacles and overcome biases. However, the lack of structured mentorship programmes and biases in performance reviews can lead to missed opportunities for women, despite their strong performance (Bonvillain 2020).

Secondly, the theme of leadership and management challenges highlights the difficulties leaders encounter in a fast-moving, constantly changing business environment. Managing uncertainty, leading change, and promoting a culture of ongoing learning are all key parts of leadership. However, the study shows that women, in particular, face added hurdles in these areas, such as limited access to growth opportunities and systemic biases that impact their leadership potential.

Thirdly, talent management framework need to be more tailored to individual goals and difficulties. Many organisations still depend on generic talent management systems, which can unintentionally put women at a disadvantage, especially in a male-dominated industry. There is a clear need for personalised development plans, mentorship programmes, and transparent promotion standards to ensure women have

equal chances for growth. While some companies have made progress in diversity and inclusion, more effort is needed to fully integrate cultural perspectives within organisations to support female advancement, particularly at senior leadership levels.

7.3.4 Influence of intersectionality

This sub-section presents the conclusion related to the influence of intersectionality, encompassing gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors, on the advancement opportunities for women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry.

The participants highlighted that gender alone does not determine exclusion; race, ethnicity, language, age, and socio-economic status also intersect to influence opportunities for advancement. Women from marginalised or under-represented groups typically encounter compounded barriers, facing both overt and covert discrimination that hinder their leadership development (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021).

Using intersectionality as a framework, reveals the complex and connected obstacles that people, especially Black women, encounter at work. Crenshaw (1989) explained intersectionality to show how gender, race, and socio-economic background come together to create unique experiences of marginalisation. Black women face the 'double jeopardy' of racial and gender bias, which limits their opportunities for leadership roles, fair pay, and professional advancement (Bauer et al., 2021; Pinem, 2023).

Structural and cultural norms, including caregiving duties, traditional gender roles, and workplace expectations of constant availability, further hinder women's career progression, particularly for those from low-income or marginalised backgrounds (Holman et al., 2021). These systemic challenges manifest as unequal access to essential resources, such as transportation, education, and mentorship, which are crucial for upward mobility (Keller et al., 2023). The participants highlighted how personal socio-economic hardships, when combined with organisational demands, significantly impede women's professional development.

Although the manufacturing sector has implemented diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts like structured talent pipelines and oversight during recruitment, these initiatives need to go beyond mere surface-level representation. Without tackling systemic biases and intersectional barriers, diversity initiatives risk being ineffective.

For instance, while some organisations include diversity oversight in their hiring practices, significant demographic imbalances often persist because of the absence of targeted, transformative strategies.

7.3.5 Efficient talent management

This sub-section presents the conclusions related to an efficient talent management system for the advancement of women in managerial and executive positions.

Finally, to achieve the fifth objective, the research outlined essential elements for a talent management framework designed to advance women into leadership positions within manufacturing. These elements encompass personalised leadership development plans (comparable to Individual Development Plans aligned with KPIs), inclusive performance management systems, sponsorship and mentorship networks, diversity-focused succession planning frameworks, data-driven tracking of career progression, and a robust cultural foundation rooted in inclusive values and visible leadership support (Marin & Marin, 2024).

In conclusion, the research shows that promoting women to executive positions in manufacturing demands a deliberate, multi-faceted talent management approach. This approach should foster an inclusive culture, challenge stereotypes, tackle intersectional issues, and ensure organisational strategies reflect women's real experiences. Only through ongoing, accountable efforts can the manufacturing sector fully realise women's leadership potential and progress toward true equity and innovation.

7.4 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's conclusions provide substantial theoretical, social, and political contributions, especially regarding South Africa's manufacturing sector.

7.4.1 Theoretical contribution: Advancing feminist and organisational theory

Through the integration of African Feminist Theory, Social Role Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Intersectionality Theory, the study provides a multi-level explanation of women's managerial and executive advancement that captures the interaction between individual, organisational, and societal factors. This integrated perspective

advances existing theoretical debates by illustrating that barriers to women's advancement are not isolated but are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

This research significantly advances feminist and organisational theory by analysing women's leadership experiences via a multi-theoretical and intersectional feminist perspective. This research builds upon the contributions of scholars like Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (2019) by implementing intersectionality in professional and industrial settings, namely, within South Africa's manufacturing industry. Current feminist workplace research frequently focuses on the experiences of white, middle-class women within corporate or academic environments (Faissner, Krüger and Müller (2022). This study elucidates the experiences of Black women in leadership positions within male-dominated sectors, illustrating the intersection of race, gender, and class in shaping their access to opportunities, career advancement, and representation in senior posts.

This research opposes the universalist inclinations of previous feminist organisational studies Kanter, 1977; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Mitkus & Jablonskyte, 2025; Bendifallah et al., 2023, which often neglected racialised power dynamics. It enhances intersectional feminist theory by emphasising how the experiences of Black women in post-apartheid South Africa illustrate both historical injustices and modern corporate structures. The findings demonstrate that women's leadership trajectories that are influenced by gender, race, and class, necessitate a more sophisticated analysis of feminist and organisational dynamics.

Finally, the development of an integrated theoretical framework represents a key theoretical contribution of the study. By synthesising African Feminist Theory, Social Role Theory, Human Capital Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and supporting theories, the framework offers a comprehensive lens for understanding women's advancement to executive management positions. The framework not only contributes to the body of knowledge on gender and leadership but also provides a foundation for future research examining women's leadership development in manufacturing and other male-dominated sectors across Africa and other emerging economies.

Assessing meritocracy and gendered organisational practices

This research further advances critical management and organisational studies by interrogating the notion of meritocracy within recruitment, promotion, and performance

assessment frameworks. This research demonstrates that systems, frequently portrayed as gender- and race-neutral, are profoundly entrenched in organisational cultures influenced by patriarchal and racialised norms (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010; Acker, 2006; Ngo et al., 2021; Gottlieb et al., 2023).

These findings corroborate Benschop and Doorewaard's, 1998; Chakraborty, 2022; Adeniyi et al., 2024, assertion that meritocratic ideals frequently obscure gender bias by favouring traits socially linked to masculinity, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and constant availability, while diminishing the value of the collaborative or relational leadership attributes commonly associated with women (Curini et al., 2023)

This research elucidates how the rhetoric of 'best fit' or 'performance excellence' subtly perpetuates exclusion, contributing to discussions in critical management studies (Alvesson & Billing, 2009) and postcolonial feminist theory (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009), demonstrating that organisational systems are ideologically charged rather than neutral. It illustrates that unchecked meritocracy fosters inequality by favouring adherence to established male and racialised leadership standards.

Advancing feminist institutionalism and organisational culture theory

The research further advances the developing domain of feminist institutionalism, which examines the interplay between institutions and gendered power dynamics (Mackay, Kenny & Chappell, 2010; Sadiki, 2023). The study's findings underscore the enduring disparity between formal diversity plans and their practical execution. Notwithstanding the existence of transformation strategies in accordance with the Employment Equity Act (RSA, 1998) and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) frameworks, numerous institutions persistently exhibit informal opposition, tokenism, and leadership prejudice.

This corroborates previous research by Booyesen (2007) and Moraka (2020), which indicated that South African organisations frequently demonstrate symbolic adherence to gender equity rules without effecting changes in the cultural norms that perpetuate inequality. This research connects feminist institutionalism with organisational culture theory, illustrating that transformation involves not just policy but also leadership behaviour, informal practices, and cultural reinforcement. It enhances theoretical

comprehension of how institutional inertia and the creation of leadership identity sustain inequality, even in the presence of reformist legislation.

7.4.2 Societal contribution

The study's societal contribution is discussed at the hand of the following:

- Enhancing the voices of disenfranchised women;
- Advocating for and facilitating inclusive work environments; and
- Enabling organisational transformation from the grassroots level.

Enhancing the voices of disenfranchised women

This study enhances the understanding of the lived experiences of disadvantaged women, who have been traditionally under-represented in academic and organisational discourses. Consistent with the work of Hooks, 2000; Collins, 2019; Humbert, Kelan & Van den Brink, 2019; Latura & Weeks, 2022, the research employed a narrative and interpretivist methodology that elucidates the systemic disparities encountered by Black women in leadership roles. This study enhances social knowledge generation by documenting these narratives, while simultaneously cultivating empathy, understanding, and critical reflection among practitioners and policymakers.

The study demonstrates how women confront the simultaneous problems of gender-based exclusion and racial marginalisation while cultivating resilience, adaptive leadership, and collective action. These accounts enhance sociology and feminist literature by framing leadership as a socially embedded practice rather than as an individual accomplishment (dynamics (Mitkus & Jablonskyte, 2025; Bendifallah et al., 2023). The testimonies of these women function as both evidence and advocacy, highlighting the significance of acknowledging varied leadership experiences in fostering equal workplaces.

Advocating for and facilitating inclusive work environments

The study enhances social practice by pinpointing institutional blind spots that obstruct inclusivity, such as the absence of flexible work arrangements, prejudiced recruitment procedures, and inflexible performance criteria. These findings correspond with Eagly and Carli's, 2007; Faulkner & Reiter, 2025; Humbert et al., 2019; Latura & Weeks,

2022, concept of the leadership 'labyrinth', which posits that women's progression is hindered by several, interrelated obstacles rather than a singular 'glass ceiling'.

The research identifies organisational shortcomings, offering practical suggestions for HR practitioners, governmental entities, and advocacy organisations aiming to foster more inclusive environments. It advocates for policies that incorporate gender mainstreaming, mentorship, and leadership development initiatives specifically designed for women in technical and industrial positions (Ngambi, 2011; Moraka, 2020, 2024). These insights are crucial for bridging the enduring disparity between legislative intentions and actual experiences in the workplace.

Enabling organisational transformation from the grassroots level

Furthermore, the study enhances the dialogue on bottom-up organisational transformation by demonstrating how employees and advocates within corporations initiate change from within. The research empirically substantiates grassroots responsibility and cultural transformation by revealing the disparity between leadership rhetoric and real practice. This reflects Booysen and Nkomo's (2020) assertion that lasting transformation necessitates collective awareness and leadership accountability, rather than mere compliance.

These findings enable employees and social partners, like trade unions and gender forums, to promote mentorship programmes, equitable career progression, and the representation of Black women in leadership roles. This research contributes to the expanding literature linking organisational transformation to social justice advocacy in the workplace.

7.4.3 Policy contribution

This section discusses the contribution that the current study made to policy.

Promoting policy reform and employment equity legislation

This report offers empirical information to guide policy reform and enhance the enforcement of transformation legislation in South Africa. The research findings correspond with the objectives of the Employment Equity Act (1998), Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), and the Gender Equality Bill, while also emphasising the disparity between policy and its execution.

The study highlights persistent exclusionary dynamics in the manufacturing sector, thereby contributing to discussions on the effectiveness of labour reform frameworks (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2020; Maseko, 2013). It promotes enhanced responsibility, regular assessment, and political commitment to guarantee that equality objectives result in cultural and structural transformation inside public and commercial entities.

Addressing organisational resistance to change

The research further enhances comprehension of institutional opposition and managerial inertia in executing gender transformation. This expands upon Acker's (2006) notion of 'inequality regimes' to elucidate how departmental administrators frequently perpetuate discriminatory systems, notwithstanding the presence of progressive legislation. This analysis of resistance informs political strategies for oversight agencies, unions, and civil society organisations to enforce compliance and accountability in diversity management.

This enhances feminist political theory by associating organisational reform with wider efforts for democratic participation and social equality.

Advancing gender-specific labour rights

The study enhances the political debate on gendered labour rights by promoting fair parental leave, childcare assistance, and secure transportation for women employed in industrial zones. These proposals are consistent with the ILO (2021) principles and the UN Women (2020) frameworks regarding gender equity in the workplace. The study reinforces the assertion that gender equity in employment should be incorporated into national development and feminist political agendas by linking micro-level organisational findings to macro-level labour policy.

This study connects academic research, social activity, and policy implementation, establishing itself as both a theoretical and practical contribution to gender transformation in South Africa.

7.4.4 Methodological contribution

This study contributes methodologically by demonstrating the value of an African feminist, constructivist-interpretivist qualitative research approach for examining women's leadership advancement within the South African manufacturing sector. While leadership and talent management research within manufacturing environments

has traditionally been dominated by positivist, quantitative, and managerialist approaches, this study employed an intersectional and contextually grounded qualitative methodology that enabled a deeper exploration of the lived experiences, structural inequalities, and organisational power dynamics influencing women's advancement into managerial and executive leadership positions.

The study's methodological contribution lies in its integration of African feminist epistemology with constructivist-interpretivist inquiry to centre the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Black women operating within historically masculinised manufacturing environments. Rather than treating women's underrepresentation in leadership as an individual or technical human resource problem, the methodology enabled the study to critically examine how organisational culture, patriarchal institutional practices, racialised perceptions, and socio-cultural power relations collectively shape leadership experiences and advancement opportunities.

Furthermore, the study contributes methodologically through the application of intersectionality as both a theoretical and methodological lens. The research moved beyond single-axis analyses of gender by examining the interconnected influence of race, language, identity, class, organisational culture, and socio-economic positioning on women's leadership trajectories. This methodological positioning enabled the study to capture the complexity and layered nature of exclusion experienced by women, particularly Black women, within South Africa's manufacturing sector.

The use of semi-structured interviews within a single organisational case study design further contributed to generating rich, contextually embedded insights that may not have emerged through quantitative survey methodologies commonly employed within talent management and manufacturing research. The qualitative design enabled participants to articulate nuanced experiences relating to informal organisational networks, merit-based advancement practices, accent-based bias, horizontal career shifting, and exclusionary leadership cultures that are often difficult to capture through standardised quantitative instruments.

In addition, the study employed systematic Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) through ATLAS.ti to support rigorous thematic analysis, coding consistency, data organisation, and interpretive synthesis (Blandford *et al.*, 2016). The use of ATLAS.ti strengthened the credibility, transparency, and analytical

depth of the study by enabling systematic identification of patterns, relationships, and intersectional themes across participant narratives. This methodological integration of African feminist inquiry with CAQDAS-supported thematic analysis contributes to the growing recognition of qualitative methodological rigour within leadership and organisational studies (Creswell's 2024).

The study therefore contributes to scholarship by illustrating how African feminist qualitative methodologies can generate contextually relevant and socially transformative insights within disciplines traditionally dominated by quantitative and positivist paradigms (Bauer *et al.* 2021). The methodological approach adopted in this study further demonstrates the importance of decolonial, intersectional, and interpretive research methodologies for advancing knowledge production that reflects the lived realities and structural challenges experienced by women within African organisational contexts.

Ultimately, this methodological contribution extends beyond the study itself by providing a framework for future researchers seeking to investigate gender, leadership, organisational culture, and inequality within complex and historically unequal workplace environments.

7.4.5 Practical (managerial) contribution of the study

The study makes a significant practical contribution in providing evidence-based insights into the barriers to women's advancement to executive management positions in the South African manufacturing sector (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020). The main managerial contribution of the study is the development of a Talent Management Framework to promote women to executive management positions.

The findings provide manufacturing industry human resource professionals, senior executives and policymakers with a greater understanding of the individual, organisational and social aspects that influence women's advancement in leadership roles. The framework provides organisations with a systematised approach to identifying, developing, retaining and promoting bright women into leadership roles.

It offers practical recommendations on the implementation of gender-responsive personnel management strategies to support women's career development and leadership development. The study underlines the need to embed gender

considerations in core talent management processes, such as recruitment, talent identification, succession planning, leadership development, mentoring, sponsorship, performance management and retention strategies.

The findings highlight the importance for human resource practitioners and organisational leaders to challenge organisational cultures, unconscious bias, gender stereotypes and informal networking behaviours that may inadvertently disadvantage women. By identifying and addressing these barriers, businesses can foster more inclusive environments that encourage the advancement of women into senior leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009).

The research has practical implications for succession planning and for leadership pipeline development. The results point to the need for transparent talent identification processes, formal mentorship programs, leadership development initiatives, and sponsorship opportunities that specifically help women with executive leadership potential to be put in place. Such actions can help to develop leadership pipelines and increase the representation of women in senior management positions. The report offers recommendations for manufacturing organisations seeking to improve diversity, equity and inclusion outcomes from an industry-wide perspective.

The study bridges theory and practice, translating empirical results into practical recommendations and a tailored talent management framework that organisations could adopt to help promote women into executive management positions.

7.4.6 Contribution to the body of knowledge

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing an empirically based understanding of the factors influencing the advancement of women into executive management positions in the South African manufacturing industry.

Previous studies by Nkomo and Ngambi (2009), and Eccles (2019) explored the gender disparities in leadership and the role of talent management in career progression, however, there is limited research done on the subject in the context of South African manufacturing industry, particularly from an African feminist viewpoint. This study generated context specific knowledge that addressed an important gap in the literature.

The findings of this study support existing gender and leadership theories, particularly African feminist theory, social role theory and intersectionality theory, that gender stereotypes, patriarchal organisational culture, unequal access to influential networks and societal expectations continue to shape women's leadership opportunities (Eagly, 1987; Crenshaw, 1989; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Moraka, 2024).

It is a significant theoretical contribution to develop the talent management framework for advancement of women in managerial and executive positions. The framework integrates African feminist theory, Intersectionality theory and Human capital theory to provide a multi-level framework of understanding the advancement of women in managerial executive positions.

Finally, the study contributes to the growing body of African scholarship on women and leadership by offering empirical evidence from the South African manufacturing industry.

7.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's findings are limited to the specific manufacturing industry that was selected, and as such, may not be representative of the entire manufacturing industry in South Africa. Nonetheless, the results provide a valuable and comprehensive understanding of the problem being explored. It is essential to note that time constraints can limit the ability of the researcher to conduct interviews with executives and managers, as required by the qualitative nature of the study. These highly esteemed individuals are not readily accessible for interviews and have limited availability to participate in the study. Accessing them proved to be extremely difficult, and it required extensive networking to secure interviews. The researcher often had to engage with multiple executive assistants before being granted access to an executive leader. One of the most challenging aspects was scheduling appointments, and on one occasion, it took nearly four months before an interview could take place.

Therefore, it can be said that it was a significant challenge to gain the participation of respondents. The researcher had to make frequent follow-up calls with the personal assistants of vice presidents and directors to schedule interviews. It proved particularly difficult to arrange appointments with White male directors, resulting in feelings of frustration, discouragement, and emotional exhaustion. Although the study aimed to

achieve a balanced representation of all racial groups in the sample to ensure unbiased findings, only a small number of White male and female directors consented to participate in the study, despite repeated efforts. This doctoral research was demanding in terms of time, and emotionally taxing.

Many participants, especially senior women leaders, shared painful personal experiences during the interviews. Some of the questions touched on deeply emotional issues related to their leadership journeys and the barriers they faced in career advancement. Representation and sampling also presented challenges at certain points, where threats were made suggesting the study should not proceed, as some felt uncomfortable with what the study was about.

A considerable amount of time was dedicated to fieldwork, conducting interviews, and analysing the data. The data-collection and analysis process was time-consuming, partly due to the rigorous peer-review process. The substantial amount of data collected was systematically organised and processed using ATLAS.ti, which streamlined the thematic coding and analysis process.

A transparent and critically evaluative approach facilitated the study process by minimising potential biases and ensuring methodological rigour. The researcher candidly acknowledged her subjectivities, ideological position, and interpretative framework, along with her identity as a feminist (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2006). The researcher recognised that these factors inherently influence the creation of knowledge.

Reflexivity was employed as a rigorous, continuous practice during the research design, data-collection, and analysis phases, rather than merely as a passive assertion. This required of the researcher to always consider how her social standing, which included race, gender, and worldview, would influence interactions with participants and their comprehension of the narratives shared.

In accordance with Brooks and Hesse-Biber's (2006) feminist methodological paradigm, the voices of participants were emphasised through collaboration and dialogical engagement to mitigate the risk of epistemic domination. The participants were urged to assume control during interviews, when appropriate, to enhance the authenticity and participant-driven nature of the dialogue. The researcher was very aware that perceived shared racial or gender identities, particularly with Black

individuals, might either foster openness or inadvertently generate interpretive blind spots. This remained accurate, despite the sample predominantly consisting of Black and Indian respondents. The researcher did not presume that appreciation equated to comprehension; thus, she examined all narratives with analytical detachment and interpretive rigour to circumvent projection or confirmation bias. This multifaceted technique enhanced the study's legitimacy and ethical responsibility by ensuring that positionality was both acknowledged and critically examined.

A limitation of this study relates to the composition of the participant sample. The study included men and women participants occupying middle- and senior-level management positions but did not include employees at entry-level positions. Although the selected participants were well positioned to provide insights into talent management practices and women's leadership advancement, the exclusion of entry-level employees may have limited the breadth of perspectives captured regarding the leadership pipeline and the early career experiences of women in the organisation. Consequently, the findings may be more reflective of managerial perspectives than the experiences of employees at the beginning of their careers. Future research should include participants across all organisational levels, including entry-level positions, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of women's career progression and the effectiveness of talent management practices throughout the leadership pipeline.

Despite these challenges, the research demonstrated significant strengths. The data collected was especially valuable, given the challenges of gaining access to managerial and executive levels (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2015). Unlike much of the existing literature on executive women, which predominantly employed quantitative methods using accounting data to debate the representation of women in executive roles (Adams & Ferreira, 2009), the current study emphasised a deeper exploration of the broader processes surrounding director recruitment, development, and talent management strategies. It shed light on the inequalities inherent to talent management practices.

7.6 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY: PROPOSED TALENT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The results of this research, which consisted of 20 interviews conducted through a qualitative approach, have shed light on key areas that have not been previously examined in the South African manufacturing industry regarding the factors that hinder women's advancement to executive management positions. The study gathered insights from managerial and executives' leaders, enhancing its analysis and helping develop the detailed talent management framework illustrated in Figure 7.1. This includes perspectives from various leadership tiers that allowed the research to identify systemic gaps and develop specific strategies to address them.

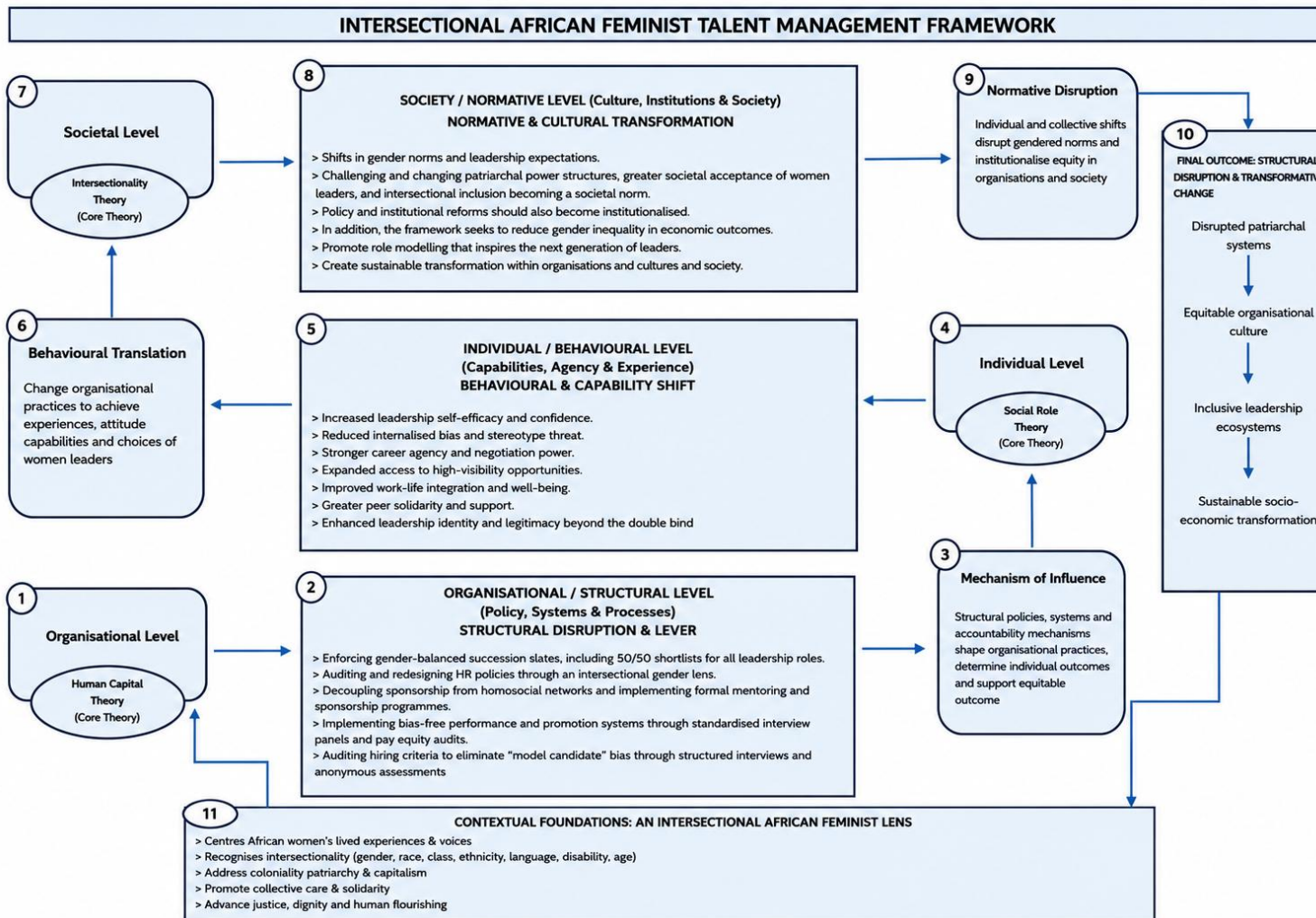


Figure 7.1: Proposed Talent Management Framework

Source: Researcher's own compilation

1. Organisational/ Structural level

- Manufacturing sectors should develop gender-inclusive organisational policies and introduce leadership accountability measures linked to diversity targets, conduct unconscious bias and inclusivity training as well as enforce gender-balanced succession slates by establishing transparent promotion and succession planning systems and implement bias free performance.
- Manufacturing industry should implement an inclusive leadership and organisational culture programme. Manufacturing sectors should implement an audit and redesign HR policies through an intersectional gender lens and develop intersectionality informed leadership policies that will promote diversity and inclusion initiatives by addressing race and gender simultaneously. The manufacturing sector provides socio-economic support where necessary.
- The manufacturing sector should encourage organisational dialogues on race, gender, and inclusion. Should embed DEI into core strategy and governance. The manufacturing sector should implement Audit hiring criteria to eliminate “Model C” accent bias, by using structured interviews & anonymized assessment.
- The sector should establish women focused leadership development programs, which include formal mentoring and sponsorship, executive coaching and career guidance. The manufacturing sector should institutionalize accountability and consequences and link equity targets to executive KPIs and rewards. The sector should implement resource management for gender equality.

2. Individual/ Behavioural level

- The manufacturing sector should implement leadership confidence building programs that will increase leadership self-efficacy and confidence, this will reduce internalized bias and stereotype threat. Implement equal access to high impact bias assignments this will create stronger career agency and negotiation power.
- The manufacture sector Implement should implement flexible work and work-life integration support to relieve the caregiving pressures and improve work-life integration and wellbeing.
- The manufacturing sector should implement networking and peer-support platforms for women leader to enhance leadership identity and legitimacy.

3. Societal/ Normative level

- The manufacturing sector should implement gender awareness norms that will address leadership expectations and awareness campaigns that will challenge and change patriarchal power structure.
- The manufacturing industry should increase the presentation of women leaders
- The manufacturing industry should implement policy and institutional reforms institutionalised
- Implement socio-economic support mechanism where necessary to reduce gendered inequality in economic outcomes
- Implement networking and peer-support platforms for women this will encourage role modelling to inspire next generation of women leaders
- The manufacturing sectors should adopt an integrated intersectional African feminist talent management framework that aligns recruitment, development, succession planning, leadership accountability and diversity strategies into one coordinated system.

These findings collectively support a talent management framework within the meso-level framework that is designed to integrate inclusive leadership practices, address structural inequities, and promote equitable advancement opportunities. The framework aims to strengthen female leadership pathways, improve retention and engagement, and enable women to participate actively in high-level decision-making.

7.7 RECOMMENDATIONS

Organisations should develop targeted recruitment strategies to increase the number of women in manufacturing, especially at the operator level, and set measurable diversity goals to track their progress (WEF, 2022). It is also essential to implement training programmes that raise awareness of unconscious biases and to ensure that selection criteria focus on skills and capabilities rather than physical stereotypes. These steps are essential to eliminate biases in hiring decisions (Macpherson, 2020). Redesigning job roles and workplace ergonomics to accommodate different workers, along with showcasing successful women employees to challenge outdated

stereotypes, are effective strategies for creating an inclusive workplace (Rozario *et al.*, 2020).

Organisations should enhance career development opportunities for women by implementing mentorship, sponsorship programmes, and structured progression pathways, especially for those with frontline experience. To support employees and transform obstacles into strengths, managers should be encouraged to offer honest and constructive feedback. They are essential to this process to foster continuous growth, and regular check-ins and coaching sessions should be established (Nash & Moore, 2021). Additionally, cultivating a culture of female empowerment is vital, ensuring women motivate and support each other rather than to compete destructively (Kaur & Singla, 2019).

Stichter and Parpart (2019a) argued that recognising and highlighting women's achievements in manufacturing can foster increased diversity and drive meaningful change within the industry.

To achieve meaningful change, individuals need to adopt new mindsets, particularly within the traditional workforce (Folbre, 2019). While challenging, efforts to dismantle gender role stigma in manufacturing have seen progress, especially among veteran staff, demonstrating that transformation is possible (Vinh *et al.*, 2022). Organisations must continue fostering environments where people recognise societal shifts, support fairness, and ensure opportunities are earned based on merit (Efobi *et al.*, 2018; Dashper, 2020).

Despite advancements in diversity hiring, further improvements are necessary, particularly in leadership roles (Ali & Akter, 2023). A key strategy involves balancing internal growth with targeted external recruitment, focusing on qualified female candidates rather than relying solely on the existing talent pools (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Roles like package management, historically occupied by capable women, have seen a decline in female representation recently (Hewlett *et al.*, 2013; Catalyst, 2020). Given the demanding nature of these roles, organisations should evaluate recent changes and explore ways to attract and retain skilled female leaders. Combining external recruitment efforts with internal development programmes can help bridge this gap and foster a more balanced leadership pipeline.

Diversity and inclusion initiatives need to be incorporated into official processes, rules, and procedures to create meaningful and lasting change. Without a systematic strategy, these efforts are likely to lose momentum and fail to produce long-term results (Catalyst, 2020). Organisations should set gender diversity goals as measurable targets, like those in the Employment Equity Act (2022-2023), making them a core part of leadership accountability. Clear policies will support ongoing evaluation, reform, and advancement, ensuring that diversity efforts are a sustained priority rather than a one-time project (WEF, 2021). Linking these objectives to key performance indicators (KPIs) may hold leaders accountable and help cultivate a culture where habits, mindsets, and routines naturally evolve as progress is monitored over time.

In the South African context, gender equality often takes a backseat to racial equality in workplace change efforts (Bodalina & Mestry, 2020). Although both are essential parts of diversity and inclusion, the challenge lies in ensuring that gender equality receives the same level of attention and urgency as racial equity. The main issue is not ignoring gender diversity but its insufficient prioritisation in leadership discussions and decision-making. Organisations need to intentionally integrate gender parity into the overall transformation plan, ensuring it gets equal focus in policy development, recruitment practices, and leadership representation. This requires a deliberate effort to balance conversations and actions, making sure that gender diversity is recognised as a vital part of an inclusive and fair workplace rather than being overshadowed by other factors.

Achieving a well-rounded understanding of gender dynamics at work involves listening to a broad spectrum of experiences, especially from those who have advanced within the organisation. While individual experiences differ, insights from women who have navigated the entire career path can shed light on the difficulties and progress in advancing gender inclusion. It is crucial to understand that not all women encounter the same barriers; some experiences may be outliers rather than typical. Nevertheless, stories of both implicit and explicit biases, such as assumptions based on traditional gender roles, like being asked to serve coffee while in a leadership role, underscore the importance of ongoing dialogue and reform. By collecting diverse perspectives and acknowledging both systemic challenges and progress, organisations can adopt a more nuanced approach to gender equity. Continual

engagement with those who have direct experience will enrich these discussions and promote meaningful change.

Achieving real change in gender representation at the executive level requires deliberate and bold actions for women in the workplace. While many organisations claim to be gender-neutral, this often overlooks the differences caused by past inequalities. The fear that providing targeted support to women might lead to opposition from men should not stop companies from taking firm steps. To reach true gender equality with a 50/50 split in leadership, organisations must actively invest in developing, training, and providing resources for female talent. Fixing this imbalance is not about giving women an unfair advantage, but about correcting the systemic disadvantages built up over time. Without intentional efforts, women will face increasing barriers in their careers and often receive less support at higher leadership levels. As women advance, they may also face resistance, highlighting the need for organisations to create an environment that not only includes women but also fully supports their leadership ambitions.

Mentorship is a powerful tool for nurturing emerging talent. While female mentorship is valuable, expanding mentorship opportunities to include all leaders, regardless of gender, can create a more inclusive support system. Male leaders, even if they may not fully understand the specific challenges faced by women, can still play a significant role in mentoring and promoting women's professional growth. Beyond mentorship, it is crucial to boost female participation at the grassroots level, especially in STEM, engineering, and IT fields. Despite progress in gender diversity within technology, these areas remain mostly male-dominated, requiring early efforts to address the gap.

Organisations should focus on building a strong pipeline by encouraging young women to pursue careers in traditionally male-dominated industries, rather than only addressing disparities at the executive level. Raising awareness, providing exposure, and creating opportunities for young women to engage with these fields early on will help develop a more balanced talent pool in the future.

7.8 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could examine how the proposed talent management framework functions in industries that are not male dominated, enabling comparisons of

organisational culture and talent management practices across various gendered environments. Furthermore, conducting comparative studies in other male-dominated industries across different countries would enhance understanding of how both men and women experience talent management practices in diverse cultural settings.

To support the research on gender diversity, additional studies could explore how female executives influence manufacturing performance, sustainability, financial results, and overall industry outcomes. Research could also examine the intersectionality between white men and Black women in the workplace, highlighting their collaborative experiences and challenges.

Furthermore, exploring the lived experiences of managerial executives at both executive and operational levels can shed light on why glass ceilings persist. This can lead to evidence-based suggestions for removing these barriers.

Finally, due to the methodological limitations of the current research, it is essential that more studies should be conducted that explore overlooked aspects, and that deepen the understanding of gender and power within organisations.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICS CLEARANCE



College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Business Management

Date: 14/05/2024

Dear: Mrs Minah Mevasani Tshabalala-Mzobe

**Decision: Ethics Approval from
14/05/2024 to 14/05/2029**

NHREC Registration # : (if applicable)
Ref #: 2739
Name: Mrs Minah Mevasani Tshabalala-Mzobe
Student #: 67120032
Staff #:

Researcher: Mrs Minah Mevasani Tshabalala-Mzobe

6353 Black Phantom Albertsdal

Alberton

67120032@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0609662094

Supervisor: Dr Nthabiseng Moraka moraknv@unisa.ac.za

Co-Supervisor:

Co-Researcher(s):

Email address:

Advancing Women to Executive Management: A Talent Management Model for South African Manufacturing

Qualification: PhD Management Studies

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Business Management for the above mentioned research study Ethics approval is granted for five years.

The **low risk application** was **reviewed** by College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Business Management on **14 May 2024** 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 College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Business Management.
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.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (14 May 2029). 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 2739 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Dr Petri Bester
Chair of College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Business Management
E-mail: bestep1@unisa.ac.za



Professor Maelekanyo Christopher MULAUDZI
Executive Dean / By delegation from the Executive Dean of College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Business Management
E-mail: tshimc@unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX B: COVER LETTER



Cover Letter

Department of Business Management

A Talent Management Model for the Advancement of Women to Executive in Manufacturing Industry in South African

Dear Prospective participant,

You are invited to participate in a semi-structured interview conducted by Minah Mevasani Tshabalala-Mzobe under the supervision of DR. Nthabiseng Violet Moraka, a Senior Lecturer, Business Management at Unisa in the Department of Management Studies towards a PhD Business Management at the University of South Africa.

You were selected to participate in this interview because you meet the inclusion criteria for this study which includes women and men at various managerial and executive level within the selected manufacturing industry. By participating in this study, you agree that the information you provide may be used for research purposes, including dissemination through peer-reviewed publications and conference proceedings.

It is anticipated that the information we gain from this interview will help us to develop a talent management model to provide actionable insights and recommendations for organisations within the manufacturing industry that would facilitate the progression of women into managerial and executive roles. By addressing the gender gap in executive positions, South Africa's manufacturing industry can better position itself for sustained growth and global executive. You are, however, under no obligation to participate and you can withdraw from the study prior to completing the interview. If you choose to participate in it will take up no more than 45 minutes to 1.5 hours.

You will not benefit from your participation as an individual, however, it is envisioned that the findings of this study will make significant contributions across theoretical, philosophical, social, political, and methodological dimensions within the existing knowledge base. Theoretical advancements are realised by establishing a connection between gender equality, talent



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APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM



Consent for Participation in an Academic Research Study
Department of Business Management
A Talent Management Model for the Advancement of Women to Executive in
Manufacturing Industry in South African

Research conducted by
Mrs MM Tshabalala-Mzobe (67120032)
Cell phone: 060 966 2094

Dear Participant

You are invited to participate in an academic research study conducted by Minah Mevasani Tshabalala-Mzobe, a Doctoral student from the Department of Business Management at the University of South Africa.

The purpose of the research is with the aim to investigate and develop a talent management model that can facilitate the advancement of women into managerial and executive roles within the manufacturing industry.

Please note the following:

- This study involves an anonymous interview. Your name will not appear in the study and you cannot be identified in person based on the answers you give.
- Your participation in this study is very important. You may however, choose not to participate and you may also stop participating at any time without any negative consequences.
- Please answer the questions asked of you in the interview as completely and honestly as possible.
- The results of the study will be used for academic purposes only and may be published in academic journal. A summary of the findings will be provided to you on request.
- Please contact my study leader, DR NV Moraka, on cell 078 447 4109 (e-mail: moraknv@unisa.ac.za) if you have any questions or comments regarding the study.

Please sign the form to indicate that

- You have to read and understand the information provided above
- You give your consent to participate in the study on a voluntary basis.



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APPENDIX D:

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

Student: Mrs. Minah Mevasani Tshabalala-Mzobe

Field of study: Doctor of Philosophy: Business Management

Student number: 67120032

Supervisor: DR. Nthabiseng Violet Moraka

Designation	
Date of the interview	

Introduction

1. *Begin with a warm greeting and express gratitude for the participant's time. Provide a brief overview of the research and its objectives.*
2. *Before we delve into the specifics, could you provide a general overview of your experiences and observations regarding gender dynamics within the organisational context?*

Section 1: Organisational Culture:

RQ1: How does organisational culture in the manufacturing industry contribute to or hinder the advancement of women into managerial and executive positions?

3. *Moving on to the organisational culture, let's explore your insights on gender inclusivity and diversity*
Can you share your thoughts on how you would describe the prevailing organisational culture in terms of gender inclusivity and diversity?
4. *Now, shifting our focus a bit, this question invites you to provide your perspective on:*
How this organisational culture, as you see it, influences the progression of women into managerial and executive positions. Feel free to share any observations or experiences you think are relevant.
5. *We are interested in any specific policies, practices, or cultural aspects that you believe have a significant impact on the advancement of women in managerial and executive roles within the organisation.*
Are there specific policies, practices, or cultural aspects that you believe significantly impact the advancement of women in leadership roles?

Section 2: Stereotypes and Perceptions

RQ2: To what extent do stereotypes about women's abilities and roles affect their progression into managerial and executive positions in the manufacturing industry?

6. *As we shift our focus to workplace dynamics, I'd like to explore your experiences and observations related to gender stereotypes in the manufacturing industry.*
Have you noticed or personally experienced any stereotypes related to women's abilities affecting their career advancement in the manufacturing industry?
7. *Moving on to another question, we're interested in specific instances you may have encountered*
Can you share specific instances where these stereotypes may have influenced workplace interactions or decision-making processes?
8. *Are there any organisational initiatives in place to address or challenge these stereotypes?*

Section 3: Talent Management Strategies:

RQ3: What are the current talent management strategies implemented in the manufacturing industry to support the advancement of women managers into executive roles, and how do women perceive them?

9. *As we delve into the dynamics of talent management, I'd like to gather your insights on how your organisation supports the advancement of women into executive roles.*

Can you provide an overview of the current talent management strategies employed within the organisation to support the advancement of women into executive roles?

10. *The following question aims to explore the tailored aspects of these strategies.*

How are these talent management strategies specifically designed to meet the unique career progression needs of women in managerial and executive positions? Your detailed perspective will provide a nuanced understanding of the targeted efforts in place.

11. *In the perceptions of women within the organisation.*

In your discussions with colleagues, how do women perceive the effectiveness of these talent management strategies? Feel free to share any anecdotes or general sentiments you've come across in your interactions.

Section 4: Intersectionality:

RQ4: How does the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors influence the advancement opportunities for women in managerial and executive positions within the manufacturing industry?

12. *As we explore the intersectionality of gender with other identity factors, I'm eager to hear your insights on how these elements come together in the context of career advancement within the organisation.*

Can you share your thoughts on how factors like race, ethnicity, and other identity aspects intersect with gender in the organization? Your perspective will help us understand the complex dynamics at play.

13. *This question aims to delve into the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds.*

Can you elaborate on specific challenges or advantages that women from different backgrounds might face in pursuit of managerial and executive roles?

Section 5: Efficient Talent Management Models:

RQ5: How does the manufacturing industry develop and execute an efficient talent management model to support the advancement of women into managerial and executive roles?

14. *As we dive into the realm of talent management models, I'm eager to hear your insights on how your organization approaches this crucial aspect.*

Can you share insights into the specific components of the model used within the organization?

15. *Now, considering the gender-specific aspect, this question aims to explore:*

How does this talent management model proactively address challenges faced by women and contribute to their professional growth?

16. *Are there specific programs, initiatives, or policies in place that focus on women's career development?*

17. *Are there any ongoing assessments or modifications to enhance the effectiveness of the talent management model? Your perspective on the adaptability and continuous improvement of the model will contribute to our understanding of its dynamic nature.*

Suggestions for Improvement:

18. *In your opinion, what improvements or changes could be made within the manufacturing industry to better support the advancement of women into managerial and executive roles?*

Thank you for sharing your insights. Is there anything else you'd like to add or any aspect of the discussion that we might have missed?

APPENDIX E:

TRANSCRIPTION COPY

Participant 1

Introduction

Q1: Could you provide a general overview of your experience and observation regarding gender dynamics within the organizational context?

Speaker2: Yeah, I think to start with the obvious. I think we are not where we want to or should be from a gender diversity point of view. If you look at the leadership, my view is, I think that there's no if we're saying that it's happening Naturally. I don't think it's in our environment it is typically more a male environment. And that's what the feeder system is providing. So to change the outcomes, I think there needs to be purposeful interventions because the natural progression is not producing the results that we would like to, to achieve.

Section 1

Q1: Okay. So, moving to the organizational culture now. We will also explore your insights and on gender inclusivity and diversity. I understand that you've also touched on that one that we are not where we're supposed to be. So can you share your thoughts on how you would describe the prevailing organizational culture in terms of gender inclusivity and diversity.

Speaker2: I think from a culture point of view, we live and breathe by ten principles, and I honestly do believe that it's not just a bunch of facts or wish list items that somewhere on a poster and it is it is a living and breathing in our environment. However, I think that is not for everyone. We are an environment that is not easily satisfied where it is an uncomfortable place to work. We always strive for more, we always need more, and we quite often under-resourced or not fully resourced as we should. And that means that there's lots of conflict, tensions and conflicting KPIs, potentially even that one team is focusing on one thing and another team is focusing on another thing. And they in definition are conflicting. But we need to improve both. It's a company of hands and we need to do both. So, I think having said that, I think if I'm know I'm going to grossly generalize. But I think that is typically where females are typically more not in those kinds of environments, in my experience. And I think that is potentially something that that could be an inhibitor. We you need to enjoy what you're doing. And that's the only way to progress in, in your career. And if you don't enjoy what you're doing, then find something else to do. From

APPENDIX F: DECLARATION OF PROFESSIONAL EDIT



CONFIRMATION LETTER

12 December 2025

To Whom It May Concern,

This letter serves as formal confirmation that I, Retha Burger, have provided professional editing and formatting services for the thesis submitted by Minah Tshabalala-Mzobe, student number 67120032.

The work included:

- Language editing (grammar, clarity, coherence, academic tone)
- Structural editing (flow, logical organisation, formatting)
- Formatting according to academic and institutional requirements
- Reference list checks and alignment with the required style guide

I hereby confirm that the editing and formatting were carried out diligently and professionally, ensuring that the final document meets academic writing and presentation standards.

Should you require any additional information or verification, please feel free to contact me at retha@skillnet.co.za or 0836535255.

Sincerely,

Retha Burger
Professional Editor
retha@skillnet.co.za
0836535255



Retha Burger
SAJHE01 tel: 012 807 3864 fax: 012 807 3864
cell: 083 453 5255 e-mail: retha@skilnet.co.za
Independent Skills Development Facilitator

Dear Ms Tshabalala-Mzobe

This letter is to record that I have completed a technical edit (formatting) and review of your thesis entitled, "A Talent Management Framework for The Advancement of Women to Executive Management: A Case in the South African Manufacturing Industry".

The technical edit that I carried out included the following:

- Inserting styles to the headings
- Captions and labels for figures and tables
- Generating table of contents, and list of figures and tables
- Ensuring that the reference list is in the Harvard method.

As a complete edit was previously done, the review focused on ensuring that the thesis is aligned with the examiners' comments.

Yours sincerely

Retha Burger

4 June 2026

APPENDIX F: TURNITIN REPORT

Similarity Report

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