

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND THE GLASS CEILING EFFECT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTORS IN KWAZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA

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—Abstract —

Globally, there is strong evidence that suggests the marginalisation of women in leadership positions in all sectors of the economy. Most research on the effect of the glass ceiling was conducted in developed countries, however, fewer studies were conducted in developing countries, specifically in South Africa. This study examined the presence of the glass ceiling effect, and the barriers hindering women's progression in leadership positions in the private and public sectors of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The results should assist organisations in both sectors to understand the nature and the barriers leading to the glass ceiling effect and be able to find means of rectifying them, especially those stemming from the organisations. Data was collected from 24 women in leadership positions in the greater area of Pietermaritzburg and Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. The study gathered qualitative and quantitative data using face-to-face in-depth interviews. The snowball sampling technique was used to identify the participants. Content analysis was utilised for qualitative data analysis, while descriptive statistics was

used to analyse quantitative data. The results revealed that the glass ceiling effect exists in both sectors, and barriers are hindering the progression of women in management positions, emanating from socio-cultural factors. The glass ceiling stems from the historically deeply rooted patriarchal society. However, the glass ceiling effect is more prevalent in the private sector compared to the public sector, and the youth is at the forefront of perpetuating the glass ceiling effect. Organisations must implement government legislated gender equality policies to ensure everyone complies with them. Organisational practices should address the barriers leading to the glass ceiling. Tougher measures should be put in place to reprimand anyone who is against the progression of women in leadership positions.

Key Words: Women in leadership, glass ceiling, management, barriers, South Africa,

JEL Classification: M19

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, there is strong evidence that suggests the marginalisation of women in leadership positions in all sectors of the economy (Smith, Crittenden & Caputi, 2012). Significant progress by women in attaining educational qualifications has not translated into a comparable improvement in their positions at work (ILO, 2016). The rate of participation of women in the global labour force is at 50%, compared to 76% for men (ILO, 2016). Although there has been an unprecedented change in the composition and participation of women in the workforce on a global level (Kiaye & Singh, 2013; ILO, 2016), their progression into positions of power is lagging (April, Dreyer & Blass, 2007). Research from the Grant-Thornton International Business Report indicates a global increase of women holding senior management positions from 19% in 2010 to 25% in 2016 (Lagerberg, 2017).

Statistics from a continental perspective showed that women in management positions constituted an average of 36.2% in North America and 34.1% in Latin America and the Caribbeans between 1991 and 2018 (ILO, 2019). There was a modest increase of 17.7% in 1991 to 22.5% in 2018 for women holding management positions in Asia and the Pacific (ILO, 2019). While there is progress across many regions of the world, the situation has been more erratic in Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (ILO, 2019). Statistics showed an average of 20% for Africa and 10% for the Middle East and North Africa between 1991 and 2019 (ILO, 2019). Unfortunately, the number of organisations without women in top leadership positions escalated from 33% to 44% in 2016 and 2017 (Lagerberg,

2017). In South Africa, women currently occupy 10% of directorship positions at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) led companies (Mabaso, 2020). These figures are still low even though women have undertaken initiatives to improve their education and skills base over the past years. Women are amassed in middle management positions, while men occupy executive positions (Auster & Prasad, 2016; Kiaye & Singh, 2013).

Several authors attribute the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions to the “glass ceiling” effect (Clevenger & Singh, 2013; Eagly & Carli, 2007). The metaphor “glass ceiling” explains the failure of a large portion of women to progress to executive management positions in their careers irrespective of their credentials and accomplishments (Sabharwal & Varma, 2017; Auster & Prasad, 2016; Kiaye & Singh, 2013). Previous studies have underscored the factors hindering women’s participation in top management positions (Sabharwal & Varma, 2017; Auster & Prasad, 2016; Kiaye & Singh, 2013; Dimovski, Skerlavaj & Man, 2010; Purcell, MacArthur & Samblanet, 2010). For example, Dimovski et al. (2010; April et al., 2007) studied the barriers facing women in middle management positions in Singapore. The results indicated that women lack adequate support mechanisms from their organisations, limited networking and coaching opportunities and rigid working conditions that do not support those who are raising a family (Dimovski et al., 2010). Purcell, MacArthur and Samblanet (2010) examined the condition of the glass ceiling and its methodological and hypothetical uncertainties. Their findings revealed that choice, social capital, homophily, networking, gender stereotypes, gender discrimination, occupational segregation and the structure of the organisation contribute to the glass ceiling effect (Purcell et al., 2010).

In South Africa, April et al. (2007) explored the reasons why more women are not taking up executive positions and the extent to which this is a phenomenon. Their findings concluded that the glass ceiling is an effect rather than a cause and that an indiscriminate societal shift is required to promote empowerment to achieve greater equality in the workplace (April et al., 2007). April et al. (2007) attributed the lack of progression of women to top management positions to lack of education, tokenism, lack of mentorship and networking opportunities and the queen bee syndrome. Kiaye and Singh (2013) examined whether the glass ceiling exists in organisations in Durban. The findings revealed the existence of the glass ceiling caused by situational factors, gender discrimination, lack of respect from male colleagues and insensitivity towards women’s multiple roles (Kiaye & Singh, 2013). They further argued that family responsibilities also prohibit women from taking up senior management posts in different geographical locations (Kiaye &

Singh, 2013). Kiaye and Singh's (2013) study focussed on women working in the Durban area. This study expands the geographical proximity to include women occupying management positions in Pietermaritzburg, which is the capital and second-largest city of the KwaZulu-Natal province. Furthermore, the study compared the glass ceiling effect on women in the private and public sectors. The objective of this study is to explore the everyday life experiences of women in leadership positions in the private and public sectors of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The paper's central objectives are to examine the existence of the glass ceiling effect and to analyse the barriers hindering women's progression in leadership positions in the private and public sectors of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

The study contributes to the body of knowledge by highlighting the everyday life experiences of women occupying management posts in a historically profoundly rooted patriarchal society of South Africa, where gender inequality is high. The results should assist both sectors of the economy in understanding the nature and the barriers leading to the glass ceiling effect and how these barriers could be rectified, especially those stemming from the organisations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Women in management: A South African perspective

Similar to global trends, there is an underrepresentation of women in management positions in South Africa. Recent statistics showed that women constitute approximately 51.2% of the population (StatsSA, 2019), but the employment statistics do not commensurate with the proportion of the population. The country's employment figures showed that women account for about 43.8% of the total employment of 16.5 million people in 2018 (StatsSA, 2019). Women occupy 32% of management posts in South Africa (StatsSA, 2018). The statistics for women in senior leadership positions are even lower. Previous studies confirm this discrepancy. Chiloane-Tsoka (2010) stated that women constituted 14.7% of all executive managers and 7.1% of directorship posts in South Africa. Bosch, van der Linde and Barit (2020) mention that the number of women holding directorship posts on JSE listed companies rose from 14.3% in 2008 to 20.7% in 2017.

The government of South Africa has shown a commitment to addressing gender inequality in all spheres of life. The Constitution sets out gender equality as a founding principle, while the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill calls for a 50% representation of women in decision-making positions in organisations (StatsSA, 2018). South Africa is ranked tenth in the world for achieving 40% of

women representation in parliament (StatsSA, 2018). Furthermore, 32% of Supreme Court Appeal judges are women, 31% are advocates, 30% are ambassadors, and 24% are heads of state-owned enterprises in the public sector (StatsSA, 2018). This is a considerable achievement by the government. However, there is still more work needed for the private sector and other public institutions to emulate the government's efforts of achieving a 50% representation of women in decision-making positions. Chilokane-Tsoka (2010) mentioned that the reason for the underrepresentation of women in upper management ranks in South Africa is attributed to a society that is traditionally male-dominated.

2.2 Barriers hindering women's progression from top management posts

Previous studies have noted various factors which have led to the glass ceiling, including: lack of adequate organisational support mechanisms, limited networking and coaching opportunities, rigid working conditions for women who are raising a family, gender stereotyping, gender discrimination and occupational segregation (Sabharwal & Varma, 2017; Auster & Prasad, 2016; Kiaye & Singh, 2013; Dimovski et al., 2010; Purcell et al., 2010; April et al., 2007).

Entry to positions of leadership begins with mentorship, which is vital for the career progression of women (Koyuncu, Burke, Alayoglu & Wolpin, 2014). Mentors are responsible for offering career development and psycho-social support to mentees (Koyuncu et al., 2014). They also perform roles in enhancing the career functions of mentees in corporate sponsorship, training, security, exposure, visibility and stimulating work assignments (Leck & Orser, 2013). The mentees learn through observation and socialisation, and a mentor poses as a role model (Ehrich, 2008).

Gender stereotyping refers to those beliefs that are culturally embedded within individuals' minds and tend to work against women's promotion to senior management positions (Hurley & Choudhary, 2016). Women have always been associated with uncompensated household chores and child-caring responsibilities, while the husbands work for a paying job (Derera, 2015). Therefore, the dual nature of women's duties in the workplace and home is likely to negatively influence their progression for top management positions (Khwela, 2019).

Purcell et al. (2010) stated that some women fail to occupy top management positions due to the choices they make. These choices sometimes force them to prioritise family responsibilities over their career progression. In some instances, women are required to relocate to other geographical locations for them to occupy senior management posts - a mammoth task that is not easy for a woman raising children (Kiaye & Singh, 2013). Consequently, women end up competing for senior

leadership posts during the later stages of their careers, when the children are grown-up and independent. Dimovski et al. (2010) observed that men and women have a different view on how they measure accomplishments. Men tend to focus their attention on material success and ego while women put their emphasis on psychological fulfilment and creating stability in their everyday lives (Dimovski et al., 2010).

April et al. (2007) also suggest the queen bee syndrome as a factor hindering women's progression to senior management posts. The queen bee syndrome is attributed to an executive woman who is unsupportive of other women subordinates, partly due to the desire to remain as one-of-a-kind in an organisation (April et al., 2007; Warning & Buchanan, 2009). Queen bees exert pressure on themselves to prove that they are rough, tough and resilient (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011). This behavioural disorder is most common where career progression opportunities are constrained, and is often driven by fear of rivalry (Brijban, 2015).

While some researchers (e.g. Smith, Caputi & Crittenden, 2012; Dimovski et al., 2010) mention that the presence of male network systems (also known as the "*old boys' networks*") tend to exclude women from influential networks, this could be viewed as an opportunity for women to form their "*girls' networks*" where they earnestly discuss issues and opportunities that could uplift them.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach where data was collected from women in leadership positions in the greater Pietermaritzburg and Durban areas of KwaZulu-Natal. The data was collected from 24 out of the target population of 30 women who occupy management positions in the private and public sectors. The snowball sampling technique was used to identify the women, and in-depth interviews were used to capture the salient issues from the women. The in-depth interviews provided an opportunity to dig deep into the women's everyday life experiences as managers in the two sectors of the economy. The interviews were conducted circa 45 minutes. A pilot test was performed on three women who were selected from the target population. These interviews formed part of the analysed data of the study. The data was analysed using content analysis, while numerical data was analysed using descriptive statistics. The data analysis procedure followed these stages: transcribing the precise word expressions, condensing the text to reduce the number of words while retaining meaning, coding the data according to the objectives and categorising the data into common themes (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). The participants were asked the same questions in different

forms to verify their responses as a way of ensuring the trustworthiness of the data sources. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants.

4. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1 Brief demographic information of the women

The majority (58%) of the women were employed in the public sector, while 42% were employed in the private sector. The plurality (46%) of women are aged between 41 and 50 years. The rest of the age categories were 31 to 40 years, over 51 years, and 21 to 30 years, which constituted 33%, 13% and 8% respectively. The races of the women were black (75%), Asians (13%), whites (4%) and mixed-race (2%). Sixty-nine per cent of women occupied middle management posts, 22% were in lower management, and 9% were in top management. Married women constituted 60%, while 28% were single and 12% were divorced. The education qualifications were Master’s Degree (48%), Honour’s Degree (28%), Postgraduate Diploma (18%) and Bachelor’s Degree (4%).

4.2 Existence of the glass ceiling in the private and public sector

For this objective, the women were asked to provide an estimate of the gender representation of top management in their respective organisations. The data was collected from 11 private and 13 public sector organisations. The results are depicted in Figure 4.1 and 4.2.

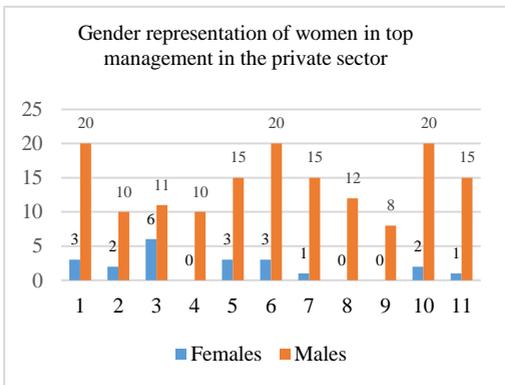


Figure 4.1: Gender representation in top management in the private sector

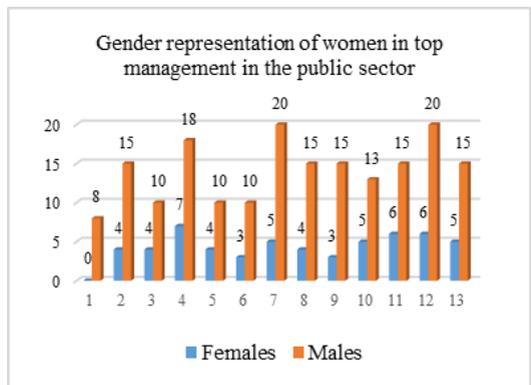


Figure 4.2: Gender representation in top management in the public sector

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 indicated a large gap between men and women in top management positions in the two sectors. The underrepresentation of women in senior management posts was more prevalent in the private sector than in the public sector. There were three private organisations and one public organisation with no

female representation at the top management level. The representation of women as a percentage of men in the private and public sectors was 13.5% and 34.8% respectively. The gender representation of women in the public sector is slightly higher than the national public sector statistics of 32% (StatsSA, 2018). These findings concur with a large body of literature that indicates a vast underrepresentation of women in top management positions (Bosch et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2014; Chiloane-Tsoka, 2010). The under-representation of women in leadership positions in the private sector calls to stricter monitoring mechanisms to achieve gender equality.

4.3 Barriers hindering women’s progression from top management posts

The second objective required the respondents to explain the barriers they encounter in their respective organisations. Eight themes emerged from the data sets (see Table 4.1). Based on the frequency distribution of the responses, it can be concluded that the barriers hindering women’s progression to top management posts are more dominant in the private sector than the public sector.

The themes were further categorised into three, as indicated by the asterisk symbols. These three themes are explained next.

Table 4.1: Barriers hindering women’s progression to top management posts

Themes	Frequency of responses	
	Private sector	Public sector
Undermining of women*	11	9
Lack of mentorship programmes**	11	13
Gender discrimination*	10	5
Lack of support from other women***	9	7
The queen bee syndrome***	5	3
Biased corporate practices**	5	2
Gender stereotyping*	4	3
Negative attitudes from the younger generation*	2	0
Total	57	42

Breakdown of respondents by sector: 13 (public sector) and 11 (private sector)

Gender discrimination and stereotyping*: Gender inequality inhibits women’s career progression to top management positions. The influence of gender inequality is more predominant in the private sector as shown by the high frequency of responses. The following excerpts illustrate how women are affected by this factor.

“People, especially men, have a mentality that since they are heads of their households, they automatically carry this responsibility at workplaces where they refuse to take orders from women. Unfortunately, men are taking

long to understand that we are colleagues at work and we can now lead them. I feel sorry for them. I am not sure, but I think this stereotyping is more prevalent in KwaZulu-Natal. I have worked in other provinces, but here it's worse" (Busi, private sector).

"Males always undermine us. I attend so many meetings and when I make a suggestion, men are quick to critique me. But when a male colleague raises the same point, everyone agrees and that is so degrading" (Thandeka, private sector).

"I think a woman is second-guessed every day, and it takes time for men to listen to you. When you are a woman, you have to prove that you are capable of leading a department. As a woman, you always have to work ten times harder than your male counterparts to prove that you know what you are doing and to get recognition. Sometimes men test your capabilities before they can trust you. I may be wrong, but this seems like a 'Zulu' thing. I have worked in three provinces of South Africa, but gender stereotyping is bad here in KwaZulu-Natal" (Zinhle, public sector).

"Here, men are chauvinists - they don't believe that a woman can lead a department. They'd rather hire men from external organisations to come and head a department, yet we are available, experienced, and qualified" (Nokwazi, public sector).

The four excerpts portray how gender inequality is deeply rooted in the workplace. Society generally views the male figure as the head of the household who makes the final decision on key matters. Busi mentioned that this mentality invades the workplace, yet the reporting structure of the family and organisation is different. Busi and Zinhle agree that it is taking a long time for men to understand equality in the workplace, as men disobey instructions from women managers. Nokwazi states that males guard senior positions in organisations seriously to the extent that they hire external male candidates at the expense of internally qualified and experienced female candidates. Busi and Zinhle agree that gender inequality is more dominant in KwaZulu-Natal compared to the other provinces of South Africa. Thandeka reports that men undermine her authority, especially in meetings where her suggestions are disregarded, yet the same proposal is supported if it is proposed by a male counterpart. She further mentions that men tend to scrutinise her instead of examining the proposals she raises in meetings. Such behaviour perpetuates negative energy in the workplace, which tends to divert focus from the core issues of the organisation.

Gender discrimination in the private sector is further exacerbated by the younger male generation who are disrespectful of women managers. To substantiate this, Carol and Zodwa stated that:

“...and there is the younger male generation and the attitude! yo, yo, yo is very bad....They have these rights and privileges which you don't even understand where they emanate from. They do not want to work. The way they apply for sick leave is astonishing. These young men deserve awards for foolishness”(Carol, private sector).

“The younger generation's attitude is alarming. They do not know how to respect people, especially women. There is a guy who is five times my junior, but the way he talks to me is so demeaning. I've told him many times that I don't like his attitude but he doesn't budge...maybe it's the way he was brought up that he feels he can treat women anyhow....” (Zodwa, private sector).

Carol's quote showed signs of mental exhaustion and surrender when she said “yo yo yo...”. Zodwa, though with a bit of exaggeration when she said ‘*five times my junior*,’ is also furious about the level of disrespect from the younger generation. The excerpts portray a different dimension of gender inequality, which gives a glimpse of the extent of the moral decay of the value system in modern-day society. Zodwa thinks that such behaviour is historically enmeshed in cultural traditions that are subconsciously relayed to the youth by the older generation. These findings concur with literature which states that the progression of women to top management positions is hindered by gender discrimination and stereotyping (Khwela, 2019; Hurley & Choudhary, 2016; Kiaye & Singh, 2013; Dimovski et al., 2010; Purcell et al., 2010; April et al., 2007).

Lack of mentorship:** Lack of mentorship is preventing women from progressing to top leadership positions. The results showed that this barrier affects more women in the public sector. Nomfundo, Sindy and Busi responded that:

“On my side, there is not much to say because women are now educated. We know that we can share our views in the boardroom. We do not have to fear anyone unlike before. We now know our rights as women. We know how to behave in the boardroom and how to engage at higher levels of the organisational structure. The main challenge that I observe is the lack of mentorship programmes aimed at preparing women to take up senior management posts” (Nomfundo, public sector).

“I think we lack mentorship programmes that are aimed at promoting women to top management. Such programmes would prepare us for higher positions so that when we reach the top, someone would have already role modelled for us. Besides, top management involves making tough decisions, so we need to learn how to go about making such decisions” (Sindi, public sector).

“As women executives, it is imperative that we try by all means to mentor other women. I remember when I started in this position, I had no idea what was going on. I worked very hard to get recognition from my male counterparts. So I feel that mentoring can allow women to gain exposure to the executive level. But having said that, it gets too busy, meetings, travelling and so on makes it difficult to mentor others” (Busi, private sector).

While Nofundo is positive about the role played by women in the boardroom, she is concerned with the lack of mentorship programmes for women, as, as indicated by Sindi, they prepare women for career advancement to senior positions. As a result of limited mentorship opportunities for women, Busi acknowledges that it was difficult to conduct her responsibilities when she joined top management. She also mentioned that it is challenging to mentor other women due to the busy schedules of her job.

Besides, corporate practices are biased in favour of men. The following quotes support this.

“Changing corporate practices take time because they are all in favour of men, but we are supposed to be equal. Eventually, this has to be done...” (Pamela, private sector).

“We are calling for a change in corporate practices, because the ‘old boy’ networks are there, and are running the show. If this could change, then maybe things could get better...” (Bongie’s public sector).

“Men look out for other men. They organise jobs for each other, probably because they don’t want to be surrounded by females...” (Shria, private sector).

“Men specifically are the ones who are in top management and they are blocking us” (Lizzy, public sector).

“Every time there is a position, even though they don’t come out as often as middle and lower management posts, I do apply, but with no luck. I have the

necessary qualifications and experience, but I do not make it. I am not sure why? I now doubt if I want to be in top management anymore” (Nokwazi, public sector).

Pamela and Bongie are calling for a change in corporate practices that support women. Shria and Lizzie agree that men are blocking women from occupying top positions. Even though Nokwazi felt she is ready to move to the next level of the corporate ladder, she is discouraged from applying for executive posts because she has attempted several times without success. These findings support the existence of the glass ceiling as supported by literature (e.g. Kiaye & Singh, 2013; Dimovski et al., 2010; Purcell et al., 2010; April et al., 2007).

The queen bee syndrome:*** Generally, women do not support each other in all aspects of life, and this includes the workplace. Moreover, the queen bee syndrome also works against their efforts to attain top management posts. Based on the frequency of responses, this barrier is more prevalent in the private sector. The following excerpt shows how women don’t support each other in the workplace:

“As women, we don’t support each other, and you are more likely to be mentored from men. I don’t know why this happens. As women professionals, we don’t want to sit together and talk about our challenges. I will make an example; I am involved in a forum that is meant to bring together women professionals. You organise a workshop about a certain issue, and people don’t pitch up. People just isolate themselves because they are now executives and don’t see a point in spending an afternoon helping a junior person. I think if we can get together and talk about our challenges, we can overcome them” (Carol, private sector).

“Honestly, we are not there for each other. My boss is a woman, and she doesn’t support me at all. She would rather support male colleagues over me, and that is discouraging. So, yeah, even when I first arrived here, I was welcomed by men rather than women. That who we are, but you find that men support each other, but for us, it is so unfortunate” (Busi, private sector).

“If women are in a position of power, they do not want to let other women by their side. They would rather have males by their side. I don’t know whether it’s because they work better with males than us. They sort of build a wall around them so that other women don’t come near. I think it’s how we relate as women, we challenge, undermine, and disrespect each other

and it pushes women executives to build a wall around them. I think that's one big reason which makes women executives not keen on helping other women to reach the top. Others are just mean by nature; they are jealous of seeing another woman succeed. I have experienced that, my supervisor, before I got to this position was discouraging me. She would say I am too ambitious. She never wanted to share anything that would enhance my career growth. She never liked me, anyway I was smarter and I worked my way up, now we are at the same level" (Nozipho, public sector).

All the women complained about the lack of support for each other. Nozipho further blames the queen bee syndrome on jealousy and disrespect for each other. These findings concur with extant literature (e.g. Brijban, 2015; Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011; Warning & Buchanan, 2009; April et al., 2007). These results probably buttress the fact that all the barriers experienced by women in leadership positions are literally "man-made". What is required is a change in the mindset of the male species for the glass ceiling to be shattered.

5. CONCLUSION

The study sought to examine the existence of the glass ceiling and to analyse the barriers hindering women's progression to leadership positions in the private and public sectors. The results revealed that the glass ceiling exists in both sectors as shown by the underrepresentation of women in top management. The results also showed the barriers hindering the progression of women to senior positions. These barriers emanate from socio-cultural factors, lack of mentorship programmes, biased corporate practices and the queen bee syndrome. These barriers could be construed as 'man-made' as they are deeply rooted in the male species. The change in mindset could go a long way in breaking the glass ceiling effect. However, the glass ceiling effect and the barriers are more prevalent in the private sector compared to the public sector. The implication is that the government should continue to enforce laws that promote gender equality in upper management echelons. The leadership of organisations should develop a comprehensive support mechanism for women to advance to management positions. More stringent measures should be put in place to reprimand anyone who is against the progression of women in leadership positions. Importantly, women should be united for gender equality to be achieved in the workplace. The recommendation is for women to establish genuine girls' networks where they share their opportunities and challenges in management. Besides, gender equality should be promoted at its

foundation, which is the family setting. When this is done, it will be easier to implement it in the workplace.

The study constituted a small sample that was selected from the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Accordingly, the results cannot be generalised to the entire province. However, the study revived the debate on the underrepresentation of women in top management positions. Future studies could explore the glass ceiling effect in other sectors of the economy, such as in academia and civil society on a larger scale.

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