







Challenging the Status Quo: Navigating Women's Leadership Barriers in the Mining Sector of Kwazulu-Natal Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The mining industry is historically male-dominated, and women face significant obstacles in accessing leadership roles, particularly within its core operational and technical functions. This study explored strategies to overcome barriers to women's leadership in the mining sector of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Grounded in the Gendered Organization Theory. The study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy, a qualitative approach, and a phenomenological research design. The study relied on the lived experiences of 13 women purposively selected in middle to executive-level roles within the mining sector in KwaZulu-Natal. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and thematically analyzed using NVivo. The results revealed three major strategies women leaders use to navigate the male-dominated environment: adopting a situational leadership style to adapt to changing team and operational dynamics, actively engaging in empowerment initiatives such as leadership development and mentorship programmes, and leveraging anonymous reporting platforms to promote workplace safety and voice concerns without fear of reprisal. The study concludes that fostering women's leadership in mining requires multi-level interventions that incorporate leadership flexibility, structural support through training and development, and psychologically safe work environments. It recommends sustained institutional commitment to gender-transformative practices, including leadership pathways tailored for women, stronger enforcement of anti-harassment protocols, and amplifying women's voices in organisational decision-making. This study contributes to scholarship by offering context-specific insights into the lived leadership experiences of women in South Africa's mining sector, thereby enriching the discourse on gendered organizational dynamics in a traditionally male-dominated industry.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, the mining sector continues to reflect deep-rooted gender disparities, with women severely underrepresented in leadership and technical roles. In Africa, and more specifically South Africa, women's participation in mining remains constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, institutional

cultures, and structural barriers.¹ Women comprise only 17% of the mining workforce, and less than 13% occupy supervisory or senior management roles. This disparity is even more pronounced in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, where conservative gender norms, underdeveloped mining regions, and limited access to support structures amplify exclusion.² Despite the existence of progressive frameworks such as the Mining Charter III, aimed at advancing women's participation, implementation remains inconsistent, and gender transformation is often superficial.³

On the African continent, similar patterns are observed. In Zambia, for example, women account for only 11% of the formal mining workforce, with fewer than 5% in leadership roles. A study conducted by Ikhsan et al. highlights how women are often relegated to auxiliary or clerical roles, while decision-making and technical functions remain largely male-dominated, perpetuating the cycle of exclusion.⁴ Moreover, in Tanzania, cultural stereotypes and limited policy enforcement continue to hinder women's career progression, despite national gender equality legislation.⁵ These barriers are exacerbated by factors such as unsafe work environments, sexual harassment, lack of mentorship, and rigid shift systems that do not accommodate caregiving responsibilities, disproportionately impacting women.⁶

In the South African context, women in mining frequently encounter hostile environments that challenge their physical safety and psychological well-being.⁷ Over 40% of female mineworkers had experienced some form of gender-based discrimination or harassment in the workplace, with many reluctant to report such incidents due to fear of retaliation or job loss.⁸ Furthermore, leadership development initiatives often adopt a 'gender-neutral' approach that fails to account for the specific challenges faced by women, such as balancing leadership with family responsibilities, navigating male-dominated networks, and managing perceptions around emotional expression and authority.⁹

Critically, while some mining companies have introduced programmes promoting inclusion—such as women-focused leadership training, anti-harassment workshops, and women in mining committees—their reach and impact remain limited and uncoordinated across the sector. There is a pressing need for context-sensitive, systemic strategies that address numerical representation and the lived experiences and career development of women leaders in mining. Without deliberate interventions, the industry risks reinforcing gender inequities that limit individual potential and organisational innovation.¹⁰

Despite efforts to promote gender equality in the workplace, the mining sector globally—and particularly in South Africa—remains a male-dominated industry where women are significantly underrepresented in leadership roles, primarily within core operational functions. This underrepresentation is perpetuated by deeply embedded gender biases, stereotypes, and institutional cultures that marginalize women's voices and capabilities.¹¹ In South Africa, mining companies have made limited progress in integrating women into senior decision-making roles, and where efforts exist,

¹ Llewellyn Leonard, "Traditional Leadership, Community Participation and Mining Development in South Africa: The Case of Fuleni, Saint Lucia, KwaZulu-Natal," *Land Use Policy* 86 (2019): 290–98.

² Leonard, "Traditional Leadership, Community Participation and Mining Development in South Africa: The Case of Fuleni, Saint Lucia, KwaZulu-Natal."

³ Nokuhle Vencentin Madolo, "Transformation of the Mining Sector of South Africa: Strategies beyond the Life of the Mining Charter in 2014" (2024).

⁴ Ikhsan Ikhsan et al., "Governance-Driven Solutions for Women's Empowerment in the Mining Sector: Tackling Gender Inequality through Inclusive Policies," *Journal of Contemporary Governance and Public Policy* 6, no. 1 (2025): 1–22.

⁵ Elizabeth Lulu Genda, "Unveiling Obstacles and Possibilities for Gender Equality in Governance Structures in Tanzania," *NG Journal of Social Development* 13, no. 1 (2024): 176–92.

⁶ Roosa Lambin and Milla Nyssölä, *Employment Policy in Mainland Tanzania: What's in It for Women?* (WIDER Working Paper, 2022).

⁷ Salome Jansen van Vuuren, Marius W Stander, and Vera Roos, "'We Are Surviving Well': Adaptive Strategies Applied by Women in an Underground South African Mine," *South African Journal of Business Management* 52, no. 1 (2021): 11.

⁸ P. N. Msibi, "Guidelines toward Mainstreaming Gender Inclusivity in the Mining Sector in South Africa," *Medicon Medical Sciences* 8 (2025): 15–30.

⁹ Sonya G. Smith and Jeanne C Sinkford, "Gender Equality in the 21st Century: Overcoming Barriers to Women's Leadership in Global Health," *Journal of Dental Education* 86, no. 9 (2022): 1144–73.

¹⁰ Obaa Akua Konadu-Osei, "The Development of Positive Work Identities of Women in Male-Dominated Jobs" (Stellenbosch University, 2023).

¹¹ Sheena Mangaroo-Pillay and Doret Botha, "An Exploration of Women's Workplace Experiences in the South African Mining Industry," *Journal of the Southern African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy* 120, no. 8 (2020): 475–83.

they are often inconsistent or lack sustained implementation.¹² KwaZulu-Natal, while less prominent in mining compared to provinces like Gauteng or Limpopo, still reflects similar trends of gendered exclusion. This regional gap has received minimal scholarly attention, despite the unique socio-cultural and operational dynamics present in the province. Moreover, the absence of focused leadership development programmes and the dominance of traditional mining norms exacerbate women's challenges. As Dolly Masilela of Exxaro Resources emphasized at the 2023 Women and Leadership in Mining Conference, increasing women's leadership is a moral imperative and a strategic necessity to transform the industry.¹³ However, empirical studies exploring concrete strategies that women use—or can use—to overcome these leadership barriers in the mining sector, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, remain scarce.¹⁴

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating and proposing practical strategies to challenge the status quo and support women's ascension to leadership roles within the mining sector in KwaZulu-Natal. Through participation in the lived experiences of female leaders in the industry, this research aims to identify practical, structural, and behavioural strategies that can inform inclusive leadership development, policy implementation, and workplace transformation. Ultimately, the study responds to a critical gap in scholarship and practice, offering evidence-based insights to advance gender equity in one of the most challenging industrial sectors.

The primary objective of this study is to explore practical strategies used by women leaders to overcome gender-based barriers to leadership within the mining sector in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. Specifically, the study seeks to understand the lived experiences of female leaders in the industry, investigate the organizational and cultural challenges they face, and examine the interventions—personal and institutional—that support their leadership development and advancement. The intention is to contribute to evidence-based strategies to improve gender inclusion and leadership equity in the South African mining sector.

Concept Definitions

Before exploring the relevant literature, it is crucial to define key concepts central to this study.

Leadership

Leadership refers to the ability of an individual to influence, guide, or direct others toward achieving shared goals. In the context of organizational leadership, it often includes strategic decision-making, resource allocation, and team management.¹⁵

Women in Leadership

Women in Leadership denotes the presence and participation of women in executive, managerial, and decision-making roles within an organization. This includes both formal leadership roles and informal influence within a structure.¹⁶

Gender Barriers

Gender Barriers are social, cultural, organizational, and systemic obstacles that disproportionately hinder women's access to opportunities, promotions, and equal treatment in the workplace.¹⁷

¹² Samuel Heimann and Kristina Johansson, "Gender in Industrial Mine Work and Organizations—Recommended Actions toward Gender Equality," *Mineral Economics*, 2025, 1–14.

¹³ Heimann and Johansson, "Gender in Industrial Mine Work and Organizations—Recommended Actions toward Gender Equality."

¹⁴ Heimann and Johansson, "Gender in Industrial Mine Work and Organizations—Recommended Actions toward Gender Equality."

¹⁵ Linda Purnamasari, "The Leadership Concepts Of Peter G. Northouse Reflected In John Grisham's Novel Character, Jake Brigrance," *JHSS (Journal of Humanities and Social Studies)* 7, no. 2 (2023): 486–89.

¹⁶ Sabrina Silva Valadares et al., "Women in Mining: From Subtle Barriers to Open Prejudice," *Revista de Gestão* 31, no. 3 (2024): 262–74.

¹⁷ Smith and Sinkford, "Gender Equality in the 21st Century: Overcoming Barriers to Women's Leadership in Global Health."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Representation and Leadership Disparities in the Mining Sector

Globally, the mining sector continues to exhibit low female representation in core leadership roles. Women represent only 8–17% of the mining workforce in various regions, with an even smaller percentage in senior leadership or technical operations.¹⁸ Some progress has been made in South Africa, but women still comprise less than 20% of the sector's workforce and less than 10% in top management positions.¹⁹

On the continent, the disparity is consistent. In Ghana, a study revealed that although women make critical contributions in artisanal and small-scale mining, they are largely absent in strategic leadership roles due to cultural stigmas and male-centric corporate structures.²⁰ Similarly, in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo, women in mining are predominantly restricted to low-tier roles, with structural and socio-cultural factors impeding their promotion.²¹ These figures point to a systemic marginalization that not only limits women's potential but also stifles the industry's capacity for innovation and inclusivity.

Transforming the leadership landscape of mining requires more than token appointments; it demands restructuring internal systems and challenging long-held patriarchal norms.²² The leadership gap reflects broader societal inequalities and highlights the urgency of tailored, context-specific interventions.

Barriers to Women's Leadership in Male-Dominated Industries

Women face many challenges in entering and thriving in leadership in male-dominated fields such as mining. These challenges include gender stereotyping, exclusion from influential networks, limited mentorship opportunities, and gender-insensitive workplace policies.²³ For instance, many women are perceived to lack the toughness required for technical or operational mining roles, a stereotype that undermines their credibility and advancement.²⁴

Additionally, the absence of female role models perpetuates the notion that leadership is inherently male. Research shows that women in mining often feel isolated, struggle to find mentors who understand their experiences, and must overperform to gain recognition.²⁵ Other barriers include discriminatory hiring practices, inflexible working conditions, and the absence of adequate protective clothing for women, particularly pregnant women.²⁶

Cultural barriers are especially pronounced in regions such as KwaZulu-Natal, where patriarchal traditions intersect with the rigid structures of the mining industry, increasing the challenges for women

¹⁸ Fitsum S Weldegiorgis, "Women and the Mine of the Future: A Gendered Analysis of Employment and Skills in the Large-Scale Mining Sector of Australia," 2022.

¹⁹ Motlhatlego Dennis Matotoka and Kolawole Olusola Odeku, "Untangling Discrimination in the Private Sector Workplace in South Africa: Paving the Way for Black African Women Progression to Managerial Positions," *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 21, no. 1 (2021): 47–71.

²⁰ Jennifer Dokbila Mengba, Raymond Aitibasa Atanga, and Constance Awinpoka Akurugu, "Small-Scale Gold Mining and Gender Roles: Critical Reflections on Socio-Cultural Dynamics in North-Eastern Ghana," *SN Social Sciences* 3, no.1(2022): 4.

²¹ Francis Arthur-Holmes and Patience Demor Matey, "Gender as an Entangled Force: Gendered Mining Entanglements, Labor Organization and Leadership Structure in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining," *Journal of Rural Studies* 115 (2025): 103594.

²² Arthur-Holmes and Matey, "Gender as an Entangled Force: Gendered Mining Entanglements, Labor Organization and Leadership Structure in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining."

²³ Wendy O'Brien, Clare Hanlon, and Vasso Apostolopoulos, "Women as Leaders in Male-dominated Sectors: A Bifocal Analysis of Gendered Organizational Practices," *Gender, Work & Organization* 30, no. 6 (2023): 1867–84.

²⁴ Donna Bridges, Elizabeth Wulff, and Larissa Bamberry, "Resilience for Gender Inclusion: Developing a Model for Women in Male-dominated Occupations," *Gender, Work & Organization* 30, no. 1 (2023): 263–79.

²⁵ Charlotte Kräft, "Equal Pay behind the 'Glass Door'? The Gender Gap in Upper Management in a Male-dominated Industry," *Gender, Work & Organization* 29, no. 6 (2022): 1910–26.

²⁶ Gabriel Edaño et al., "Thru Her Lens: Female Experiences and Narrative on Male-Dominated Industry," *Diversitas Journal* 10, no. 1 (2025).

leaders.²⁷ This intersectionality makes it imperative to implement gender-aware leadership development and institutional reform.

Strategies and Interventions to Promote Women's Leadership in Mining

Historically dominated by men, the mining industry is undergoing a gradual yet critical transformation towards greater inclusivity. However, the representation of women in leadership positions—particularly within core operational functions—remains minimal, both globally and across Africa. To address this disparity, various strategies and interventions have been implemented at organizational, national, and international levels to empower and elevate women into leadership roles.

At the organizational level, mining companies are increasingly recognizing the importance of institutional change to remove systemic barriers. Key among these interventions are anti-harassment and anti-discrimination training programs, which aim to address the hostile work environments often reported by women in the sector.²⁸ In South Africa, for instance, companies, such as Exxaro and Anglo American, have implemented comprehensive training initiatives, following feedback from employee surveys that revealed the prevalence of gender-based harassment and bias.²⁹ These efforts are crucial in creating safer, more respectful workplaces that allow women to focus on performance and leadership development.

Beyond South Africa, regional efforts in countries like Kenya and Zambia reflect promising interventions. In Kenya, gender-mainstreamed Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has increased the proportion of women entering the extractive industries by targeting skills development aligned with labor market demands.³⁰ Zambia has similarly implemented affirmative recruitment strategies and public-private partnerships aimed at gender parity in mining education and apprenticeship pathways.³¹ These regional case studies demonstrate that strategic alignment between education, policy, and industry needs can significantly enhance women's readiness for leadership roles.

An often overlooked yet increasingly critical intervention involves the creation of internal advocacy bodies and safe spaces within mining corporations. Committees, such as Women in Mining (WIM), serve dual roles: They provide peer support and networking opportunities while lobbying internally for gender-sensitive policies, including appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for women, maternity accommodations, and flexible scheduling.³² In KwaZulu-Natal, such committees have influenced tangible changes, such as redesigning PPE to accommodate pregnant miners and organizing conferences that address financial literacy, mentorship, and inter-women support.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse by documenting the lived experiences of female leaders in the mining industry and identifying evidence-based, contextually grounded strategies that have proven effective. The research aims to provide a roadmap for organizations, policymakers, and academic institutions to foster inclusive leadership in mining and similar male-dominated sectors by foregrounding women's voices and examining the practical interventions that support their leadership journey.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gendered Organization Theory

²⁷ Ntombikayise Nkosi, "Breaking Barriers and Building Bridges: Unveiling the Enablers of Women School Leaders to Overcome Gender Inequality in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa," *Research in Educational Policy and Management* 6, no. 2 (2024): 436–53.

²⁸ Luke Daniel, "Mitigating the Barriers to Female Inclusion in the Mining Sector: A Framework for Change," *Open Journal of Business and Management* 12, no. 5 (2024): 3208–22.

²⁹ Doris Buss et al., "Beyond the Rituals of Inclusion: The Environment for Women and Resource Governance in Africa's Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining Sector," *Environmental Science & Policy* 116 (2021): 30–37.

³⁰ Selene Castañeda-Burciaga et al., "Inclusion of Women in the Mining Sector: Challenges and Opportunities Through Education," *Education Sciences* 15, no. 1 (2025): 69.

³¹ Abigail Efua Hilson, "Women in Development Minerals: Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining, Governance, and the SDGs," *Environmental Science & Policy* 164 (2025): 103980.

³² Msibi, "Guidelines toward Mainstreaming Gender Inclusivity in the Mining Sector in South Africa."

This study is underpinned by Gendered Organization Theory, a sociological theory developed by Joan Acker in 1990, which critically examines how gender inequalities are structurally embedded in organizational processes, norms, and practices. Organizations are not gender-neutral spaces; rather, they are “gendered” in their structure, culture, and daily operations, reproducing male dominance through formal and informal rules, workplace expectations, and leadership pathways.³³ Acker’s framework identifies five key processes through which gender is embedded in organizations: the division of labor, the construction of symbols and images, interactional dynamics, individual identity formation, and the organizational logic that privileges masculinity as the norm.³⁴ This theory highlights how systemic and invisible barriers, such as gender stereotypes, exclusionary networks, biased evaluations, and male-centric leadership models collectively obstruct women’s access to leadership roles. This theoretical lens is directly applicable to the present study, which explores strategies to overcome leadership barriers for women in the mining sector of KwaZulu-Natal, a historically male-dominated industry. It helps explain how organizational structures and power relations in the mining sector reinforce gender disparities and marginalize women, particularly in core operational and decision-making roles. The theory aligns closely with the variables of the study: women in leadership, barriers to advancement, and strategies to navigate exclusion, all of which are shaped by the gendered nature of organizational systems. By applying Gendered Organization Theory, this research seeks to illuminate the institutional and cultural dynamics that hinder women's progression and to explore how women contest, navigate, or adapt to these gendered structures in pursuit of leadership within the mining industry.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm, to explore strategies for overcoming leadership barriers experienced by women in the male-dominated mining sector of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The qualitative approach was chosen for its strength in capturing rich, contextual, and in-depth insights into the lived experiences of individuals, particularly in complex and socially constructed environments such as gendered leadership spaces in mining. This approach enabled the researcher to access nuanced perspectives, emotions, and interpretations of participants as they navigated leadership roles in an industry historically structured around patriarchal norms and practices.

The research was further guided by a phenomenological research design, which is concerned with understanding how individuals make sense of their personal and professional experiences. Phenomenology was especially appropriate for this study as it seeks to reveal the “essence” of participants’ lived realities, thereby enabling the researcher to illuminate the unique and shared meanings women assign to their leadership journeys within a challenging industrial context. This design supported the exploration of the subjective dimensions of workplace culture, gendered expectations, leadership adaptation, and structural constraints faced by women in the mining sector.

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to deliberately select information-rich participants who could provide insight into the phenomena under investigation. A total of 13 women in middle to executive-level management positions across various mining operations in KwaZulu-Natal were selected based on their relevance to the study’s objectives. The principle of data saturation was used to determine the final sample size; interviews continued until no new themes or significant insights emerged.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants the flexibility to articulate their experiences while ensuring that the researcher could probe key thematic areas aligned with the research objectives. Due to logistical considerations and participant preferences, interviews were conducted virtually using email and Microsoft Teams. This multi-platform strategy facilitated inclusivity and accessibility, particularly for participants operating in remote mining sites or with limited availability due to professional commitments. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that systematically identifies, organizes, and interprets patterns of meaning (themes) across the data set. The process was facilitated using NVivo software, which allowed efficient

³³ Joan Acker, “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations,” *Gender & Society* 4, no. 2 (1990): 139–58.

³⁴ Acker, “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations”; Joan Acker, “Gender and Organizations,” in *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender* (Springer, 2006), 177–94.

coding, management, and visualization of qualitative data. Themes were derived inductively, grounded in the participants' narratives, and interpreted in relation to the broader theoretical and empirical literature on gender, leadership, and organizational behavior. The combination of an interpretivist epistemological stance, qualitative methodology, and phenomenological design provided a coherent and rigorous framework for this study. This methodological alignment enabled exploration of how structural, cultural, and interpersonal dynamics within the mining industry shape and constrain women's leadership trajectories, while also highlighting the strategies they employ to navigate and challenge these barriers.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategies for breaking women's leadership barriers in the mining sector

The main objective of this study was to explore strategies to navigate women's leadership barriers in the mining sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The study participants revealed three ways that female leaders were dealing with challenges: (1) Situational leadership, (2) Training and (3) Reporting platforms.

Theme 1 – Use of situational leadership style

The participants had a good understanding that one leadership style cannot cover all the circumstances they face in the mining industry. There was a mixed response regarding whether women need a different leadership style from men in the mining industry. There was also overlap among the participants in their understanding of leadership and management.

Leadership flexibility befitting the situation

In general, the leadership style demonstrated by female leaders is situational leadership. It ranged from being accommodating, open and a good listener to being firm and putting their foot down and being autocratic when needed. One participant termed situational leadership as “freestyling” regarding herself as a democratic leader. A second participant stated that, due to recently joining the mining industry, which she deemed tough, she has changed her leadership style to be a confrontational leader.

P10 expressed how her leadership style changes, using different approaches: *Accommodating, good listener, supportive. Have engagements with people. Can be firm in certain situations. Having a consistent personality, I try by all means to have that. (P10)*

P11 bases her leadership style on the performance of her subordinates. Each subordinate is led in a style that suits how they perform. P11 explained: *So this is my leadership style: if I know definitely that you are one of these employees who deliver, I don't have to check on you. I just know that would be sorted out. And then, differently, we also have those employees that we have to check ten times to make sure that they're doing it. (P11)*

P5 expressed that different teams require different leadership approaches, based on her own experience of leading different teams: *I have led different teams. I've led the operations team and then went back to the technical team and I realised that you need to approach the two differently. I'm usually very clear on the expectations. (P5)*

An interesting expression was provided by P6. She described her leadership style as “freestyling” – leading in a manner that is suited to the situation: *So, for me, I always say I'm freestyling. It means my leadership style depends on the situation at the time. So for me, there's no one-size-fits-all... I always say to myself, there's no bible for life and there's no bible for leadership as well. As a leader, you make mistakes. The important part for leaders who make mistakes is to learn from their mistakes. (P6)*

P7 puts people first, adopting a people-oriented leadership style: *So I'm people-centric most times. Yeah, most times I'm people-centric. I also pull people on the journey together, and it's less pushy. Pushing occurs during moments of stress or high pressure, where I feel like we need to move faster. (P7)*

P12 switches between leadership styles as and when needed, for example, from authoritative to transformational: *I think I'm someone who can also transition between the leadership styles because I think a good leader knows when to be what at a particular time. So whether you are a very authoritative or whether you're now a transformational leader, who's you knows, depending on what your team needs at the time, I think I'm able to switch between the leadership styles as and when needed. (P12)*

P13 is collaborative, firm at times, and accepts different views: *I'm a very approachable person. I am collaborative, and when there is a need, I would put my foot down, but I'm a person who likes to collaborate with people and get ideas from people. I am not a person to dictate. (P13)*

P2 considered herself a democratic leader, recognizing both its strengths and weaknesses: *The leadership qualities that I possess, I think I'm more of a democratic leader. That is a strength and a weakness at the same time. The reason why I say it's a strength and weakness at the same time is that I believe in hearing everyone's opinion. As a leader, you don't need to make all the decisions because you are also stifling creativity. However, it takes time to make decisions. When you always lead like that, giving everyone the platform to bring up their ideas. (P2)*

P3 described herself as a confrontational leader, as she has found that since joining the mining industry from the fast-moving goods industry, the former requires a firmer leadership style: *I was more coming from the empathetic point of view, let's do this as a team. Let's do it together, but we don't have the luxury of time because you are always pointed in a million directions. I just need you to do your job, and that's it. So I have ended up being more of a confrontational leader. I just need things to be done, and we will have the uncomfortable conversation because I feel like people are not used to being told they are not doing it right or they are not performing. (P3)*

Grapple to find a style to lead effectively

In general, believed that they did not require a different leadership style from their male counterparts. These female leaders were aware of the fact that there was a temptation to act more like males or be more aggressive at work to try and get their voices heard. However, they viewed this as an act or facade that would not be true to their authentic selves and personalities. P6 found that she and some of the women in the mining industry had changed, becoming more aggressive because it is a male-dominated industry, and they want to be seen and heard.

However, P6 believed that women do not need a different leadership style from men: *Something that I was actually reflecting on, sometimes as females we think we need to be aggressive, sometimes. You think we need to be aggressive. I really believe that you don't need to be a female. You don't need to be aggressive because sometimes you feel like people are not listening to you as a female, and then now trying to change your leadership style and become more aggressive. So, for me, I believe as a female, we don't need a different style from the male, you know. (P6)*

P7 also believed that women do not have to use a different leadership style, but use what works for them. They do not have to be aggressive just because they work in a harsh environment: *It's not that women need a different style. I think they need to be comfortable with their style without changing it because of the environment and how people have that bias. There are too many stereotypes against women. Oh, she's too aggressive. She's too emotional.... I don't think women need a different style. I think they should be comfortable with their own style of leadership and not change it because of perceptions. (P7)*

P5 endorsed what P6 and P7 shared:

I don't think they need a different leadership style. I think we must just not try to mimic our male counterparts because maybe our, you know, softness helps bring the softness or bring the balance, but I really don't believe it should be any different. (P5)

Situational leadership entails adapting one's leadership style to the specific needs and circumstances of the situation, taking into account the maturity level and competence of followers.³⁵ This approach recognizes that no single leadership style is effective in all situations and that leaders need to be flexible and adaptable to achieve success. Situational leadership involves assessing the situation and followers' needs, and then adjusting the leadership style accordingly, either by providing more direction, support, or delegation.³⁶ In the context of women leaders in the mining sector, situational leadership can be useful in navigating the complex and dynamic environment of the industry. For instance, in situations where followers are new to a task or lack confidence, a more directive leadership style may be necessary, providing clear guidance and instruction.³⁷ In contrast, when followers are experienced and competent, a more delegative leadership style may be more effective, empowering them to take ownership and make decisions. Research has shown that situational leadership is positively related to leader effectiveness and follower satisfaction.³⁸ Moreover, studies have found that leaders who can adapt their leadership style to the situation are more likely to achieve their goals and build strong relationships with their followers.³⁹ By adopting a situational leadership approach, women leaders in the mining sector can develop the flexibility and adaptability needed to overcome leadership barriers and achieve success in a challenging and male-dominated industry.⁴⁰

Theme 2 – Women's Empowerment Training

The participants mentioned the initiatives that the business is currently implementing. These initiatives include a variety of topics and address some of the challenges women in leadership confront.

Anti-harassment training

The company administers two “people surveys” annually. These surveys capture feedback about the company from the employees. Female employees, especially young females, have highlighted how they have had sexual advances from men. In response, the company implemented a formal training initiative to educate all employees about bad behaviour. The training is termed anti-harassment training, covering bullying and discrimination and having a very strong focus on sexual harassment. The study participants detailed their experience regarding this training. Responses from P5, P7, P8, and P1 are provided below: *I think the cascading of the sexual harassment, or was it the harmful behaviours training? Let me put it like that, which focuses on sexual harassment. I think it's a good thing that the company is doing because it has actually informed a lot of people that there is support. (P5)*

So a lot has been done around training on harassment, bullying, I think. I think at lower levels, the message is not really owned, but a lot has been done just around that. Also, just the work around the everyday respect to enter the facilities to assist, just the integration of ladies within the operating areas. (P7)

I'm aware of their sexual harassment training that was done earlier this year, so I believe from the people survey feedback that the company did identify that there is still an issue in terms of that. (P8)

³⁵ Syari Ayati, Arthur Sitaniapessy, and Joko Rizkie Widokarti, “The Influence of Organizational Climate, Situational Leadership Style, and Job Satisfaction on Employee Performance at the East Kalimantan Regional Police Medical and Health Unit (Biddokes),” *Paradoks: Jurnal Ilmu Ekonomi* 8, no. 2 (2025): 697–707.

³⁶ Geir Thompson and Lars Glasø, “Situational Leadership Theory: A Test from a Leader-Follower Congruence Approach,” *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 39, no. 5 (2018): 574–91.

³⁷ Paul Hersey and Kenneth H Blanchard, “Grid® Principles and Situationalism: Both! A Response to Blake and Mouton,” *Group & Organization Studies* 7, no. 2 (1982): 207–10.

³⁸ Robert P Vecchio, Joseph E Justin, and Craig L Pearce, “Empowering Leadership: An Examination of Mediating Mechanisms within a Hierarchical Structure,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (2010): 530–42.

³⁹ Michael T Geier, “Leadership in Extreme Contexts: Transformational Leadership, Performance beyond Expectations?,” *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* 23, no. 3 (2016): 234–47.

⁴⁰ Nataly Schweikle, “Situational Leadership: How to Effectively Lead and Motivate Employees through Each Development Stage,” 2014.

So even after the training, they also make fun like, ohh no, I'm not allowed to open the door for you. They are almost taking it to the extreme, you know (P1).

Leadership training

Participants believed that the company had done well in providing management training to middle management employees. However, the participants felt that a leadership programme tailored specifically for women is needed, as the challenges that career women face differ from those faced by men.

P8, P9, P6, and P10 referred to the MDP, and their responses were as follows:

I think there is a sup training. Yes, it is for everyone, but it's also empowering female leaders in getting those management skills that will help us navigate our careers. (P8) Yes, you are a chemical engineer by qualification, but to get to the management role, what are the good qualifications to get you there? (P9)

... but at the end, I still believe you can do a leadership programme for females, you know. Remember, we can do leadership programmes like you guys are doing, it's for everyone, but specifically, we need to probably investigate the impact on female leaders if we are focusing on that. (P10)

Training

The participants referred to the training program that the company offers. This programme is specifically for women. The objective is to hire women within the host community and offer them work experience in the mining industry. The women selected have qualifications related to maths and science from the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Further Education and Training (FET) colleges. Most of the women who join this programme end up being hired as permanent employees within the company, and some are offered opportunities to study further. P6 and P8 indicated that they are aware of the training programme offered by the company:

Like I was actually looking at the training Programme. It brought in six females last year [2023], and now those females have started going into the positions. We are recruiting them, and also we're working on the strategy to bring in training for females who have engineering trades so that we can have those MCs [maintenance controllers] coming into the leadership roles. (P6)

There's also the training, specifically geared towards women, getting women into the mining industry and giving them some kind of experience. (P8)

Women in Mining (WIM) Committee

The participants mentioned a Committee that the company had established some years ago. The purpose of the committee is to improve the work experience of women in the mining industry. It plans events and has initiatives such as the modification of personal protective equipment (PPE) to be suitable for female bodies. The impact of the committee is highly visible during August, which is women's month in South Africa. P6, P8, and P10 elaborated on what the committee has achieved, including the holding of a Women's Day conference and what was learned from the conference:

This year, we had a session, the Women's Day conference, where we had motivators, people from the industry, women who have succeeded in the industry. Went as far as understanding the financials, and something that most of the women are struggling with to manage. (P6)

I am aware of the Women in Mining Committee, so I'm aware that there is a space as a woman or a community that you can join to effect change in the organisation. (P8)

Women in Mining conference. They were talking about things we should be doing as women, because, naturally, as women, we are not supporting each other. It's just how it is. We want to destroy each other

instead of supporting each other. If one female is succeeding, we want to make sure that we pull them down, but we shouldn't be doing those things, and that was the theme at that conference. (P10)

P4 pointed out how the company has been considerate by modifying PPE to suit a woman's body. This initiative came from the company Committee of the mining company of interest.

I've seen the PPE for pregnant women, which makes them comfortable, and I remember when I was pregnant, and I was still at Lonmil when I couldn't zip my pants, and I would wear bigger sizes. So, for a company to know that a woman needs more comfortable pants that can stretch; it's not their responsibility, but they're taking it upon themselves, and they've made female pants that have drawstrings. I really appreciate that. (P4)

The participants mentioned the training that the company of interest offers to women. This is the training, which is aimed at advancing women from the local community surrounding the mining company. The focus of the programme has been to get women into operational roles. One of the participants stated that the future aim of the Training Programme is to hire more women in artisanal engineering trades. This is due to the company not having any female maintenance controllers. The programme was initiated in 2019 at a TVET College and aims to increase the number of women with mining-related skills.⁴¹ The participants also mentioned a management development programme offered to all middle managers in the company of interest. The programme aims to impart important leadership skills to employees at the superintendent level. Companies have a year-long leadership and business development programme aimed at accelerating women's growth in the mining sector.

The participants also shared that the company has implemented anti-harassment training. The focus of this training is on inappropriate behaviour at work, with an emphasis on sexual harassment. The participants stated that the programme was initiated after several young female employees responded to a company-wide survey, called the People Survey, indicating that they were being sexually harassed. The leaders in the company responded by launching the anti-harassment training. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, sexual harassment against women is common in the mining industry, especially in underground mining.

The female leaders also shared that the company has a Committee. This committee serves as a safe space for women to share their struggles and develop initiatives to address them. A certain mining company called Sibanye-Stillwater has a women's committee which shares the same objectives as the Committee at the company of Interest.⁴² Mining companies in South Africa are initiating gender equality forums or women in mining forums to address issues such as pay parity between men and women, the low number of women in leadership roles, and recruitment strategies to increase female representation. These committees are often ineffective due to the shift work cycle typical of the mining industry.⁴³ As a result, there are instances where women miss committee meetings because of their shift schedules.

Theme 3 – Reporting Platforms

The participants mentioned reporting platforms, which the company has for reporting any form of mistreatment. Participants prefer these platforms because they believe that they are safer and that there will be no discrimination since they are anonymous.

Anonymous reporting

P9, P10, P4, and P11 mentioned the various platforms and channels that the mining company of interest has in place to address issues. These range from anonymous reporting platforms to workshops. The responses of the participants were as follows:

⁴¹ E. Marabwa, "Opportunities in the Mining Sector for Women" (Slide Presentation) Department of Mineral Resources and Energy. [https://www ...](https://www...), 2021).

⁴² Nelly Mashaba and Doret Botha, "Factors Affecting the Attraction of Women to Technical Mining Positions in South Africa," *SA Journal of Human Resource Management* 21 (2023): 1–16.

⁴³ Mashaba and Botha, "Factors Affecting the Attraction of Women to Technical Mining Positions in South Africa."

There is a platform where one can speak out freely. One can also be anonymous on the platform to say this is what is happening in their sections. P(9)

The company is doing a lot currently to make sure that people are heard. Like, there's my voice. There's a carehab if really things are sensitive. So there are a lot of platforms where people are able to voice their concerns if they are really being affected in that way. (P10)

Uh, the workshops that have been held with females, where they can voice their concerns either individually or in groups as well. And then the platforms that we have available to report these types of things. (P4)

They have opened a platform, I believe for where you can go report all those things that are not right that are happening. The portal, the anonymous one....the voicing out platform – it's good because you can always voice out if you are not treated fairly. (P11)

The emerging theme of reporting platforms highlights the need for formal mechanisms for women to report challenges and incidents, such as harassment, in the mining sector. This finding is consistent with recent research that emphasizes the importance of creating safe and confidential reporting systems to address workplace harassment and promote a culture of accountability.⁴⁴ Women are more likely to report incidents of harassment when they feel confident that their reports will be taken seriously and that there will be no retaliation.⁴⁵ The implementation of reporting platforms can help create a sense of safety and support for women in the mining sector, allowing them to report incidents without fear of reprisal. Anonymous reporting systems can be particularly effective in encouraging women to report incidents of harassment.⁴⁶ By providing a secure and confidential reporting platform, organizations can demonstrate their commitment to addressing the challenges faced by women and promoting a culture of respect and inclusivity. In the context of the current study, the need for reporting platforms highlights the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive work environment for women in the mining sector. By implementing reporting platforms and other support systems, organizations can help to address the leadership barriers faced by women and promote their advancement in the industry.⁴⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Recommendations

From a policy point of view, this study makes a compelling case for sector-specific gender transformation frameworks that go beyond quotas to address institutional culture, safety, and leadership pipelines. Mining policy at both national (DMRE regulations) and organizational levels must incorporate gender-responsive leadership development programmes, with a clear mandate to include gender-focused impact assessments in all training and HR interventions. Furthermore, reporting platforms must be regulated and standardized to ensure that they meet both ethical and psychological thresholds for confidentiality, access, and non-retaliation. Policy support is also needed to institutionalize women empowerment programmes across all regions, supported by funding, mentorship, and post-training employment guarantees.

Practical Recommendations

The findings underscore the need to institutionalize flexible and inclusive leadership development pathways that accommodate the lived realities of women in mining. Situational leadership, as practiced

⁴⁴ M. Sandy Hershcovis et al., "See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil: Theorizing Network Silence around Sexual Harassment," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 106, no. 12 (2021): 1834.

⁴⁵ Paula McDonald and Sara Charlesworth, "Academic Evidence on the Causes, Manifestations and Responses to Workplace Sexual Harassment: Initial Submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces," 2019.

⁴⁶ K. Jaspin and D. Vasithra, "Anonymous Public Reporting and Awareness System for Women," in *2024 4th International Conference on Ubiquitous Computing and Intelligent Information Systems (ICUIS)* (IEEE, 2024), 531–38.

⁴⁷ Thelma Chanda Chansa and Loveness Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions," *Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports* 18, no. 6 (2024): 273–90.

by participants, must be integrated into leadership training and coaching curricula, enabling all leaders—regardless of gender—to manage complexity and human capital with nuance and empathy. Practical initiatives, tailored anti-harassment workshops, and ergonomic redesigns, such as PPE modifications for pregnant workers) exemplify best practices that can be scaled across other mining operations. Additionally, the creation and sustained support of platforms such as these are instrumental in fostering trust, psychological safety, and early conflict resolution. Mining companies must now move beyond compliance to commitment—embedding gender responsiveness as a core operational and cultural ethos.

Theoretical Recommendations

This study extends the application of Situational Leadership Theory within a gendered, high-risk, and hierarchical industrial context. It challenges the implicit gender neutrality of the theory by illustrating how women leaders deploy adaptive leadership not only to respond to subordinates' readiness levels but to actively resist and navigate institutional sexism and structural inequities. The integration of feminist organizational theory is suggested to augment traditional leadership models, recognizing the socio-political context in which female leaders operate. Additionally, the data contributes to intersectional leadership discourse by illuminating how motherhood, marital status, and safety concerns intersect to influence leadership styles, work-life integration, and career progression within hyper-masculine environments.

Area of Further Research

A key limitation of this study lies in its focus on a single geographical context—KwaZulu-Natal—within a specific segment of the mining sector, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other provinces or countries with different socio-economic, cultural, or regulatory environments. As such, an important area for further research would be conducting comparative studies across multiple mining regions in South Africa or sub-Saharan Africa to determine whether similar leadership strategies and barriers exist elsewhere. This would help validate and broaden the applicability of current findings and inform more comprehensive gender inclusion strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the multifaceted strategies women use to navigate and overcome leadership barriers within the male-dominated mining sector in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The findings reveal that female leaders are not only adapting their leadership styles to context-specific challenges through situational leadership but are also leveraging empowerment programmes, institutional reporting platforms, and internal support structures. The capacity to oscillate between leadership styles, the willingness to remain authentic amidst systemic pressures to conform to traditionally masculine leadership archetypes, and the role of contextually responsive training and safety mechanisms underscore the resilience and adaptability of women in mining leadership. Collectively, these findings point to an emerging paradigm in which women are not merely surviving in the mining sector but are actively redefining the contours of leadership through inclusion, collaboration, and systemic critique. The study contributes to the discourse on gender transformation in extractive industries and lays a foundation for broader institutional change within historically exclusionary environments.

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