



# Gender Equality or Inequality in Learning Institutions in South Africa: A Case of the Professional Advancement of Women

Dee Khosa<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Safety and Security Management, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Aubrey Matlala Road, Soshanguve South Campus, Pretoria, South Africa.

## ABSTRACT

This study unveils the role of gender issues in the professional advancement of women in learning institutions. The study investigated the status of women's professional advancement in South African learning institutions and identified the obstacles encountered by women in advancing professionally in these institutions. The study examined the work environment in learning institutions when women are in leadership positions and discussed male employees' perceptions of female colleagues and superiors. The research used a primary data-gathering technique and a qualitative data-collection tool in a descriptive research strategy under the interpretivist research philosophy. The study's target population included both women and men in learning institutions in South Africa. The participants were chosen for interviews using the purposive sampling technique. Following the thematic analysis approach, the findings revealed that there are several opportunities for women to progress in their careers at South African educational institutions, as well as several leadership roles. They are also given increased trust and responsibility. Some participants believed that there are no barriers that prevent women from advancing professionally in educational institutions whereas others believed that existing barriers are primarily caused by individual issues, a lack of support, cultural issues, and concerns about sexual misconduct. When women are in positions of leadership, the perception of the workplace atmosphere is equivocal. While certain participants felt that jealousy made the workplace hostile, others believed that the environment was inviting and provided opportunities for female employees to advance. Finally, it was indicated that the paradigm for empowering women in South Africa must emphasise seizing chances, providing a guiding structure, recognising efforts and successes, and eliminating patriarchy. This study contributes to the existing discourse on the role of gender in the career advancement of women.

## Correspondence

Dee Khosa

Email:

[khosad@tut.ac.za](mailto:khosad@tut.ac.za)

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations (UN), gender equality serves as a fundamental human right. It is a must for a conflict-free and thriving world. Women's empowerment can be defined as the process of providing women access to education, healthcare, employment, and political representation to enable them to be in charge of their lives and futures.<sup>1</sup> To facilitate the abovementioned aspects for women, various barriers that are cultural and systemic must be removed. Women's empowerment could lead to improved health, elimination of poverty, and

<sup>1</sup>United Nations (UN), "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment," UN, 2022, accessed May 10, 2023, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

a boost in economic output. Increased political representation resulting from women's empowerment could reduce gender-based discrimination. Women's empowerment is not only necessary for women but also for the entire society.<sup>2</sup> According to Ranganathan et al., the economic empowerment of women leads to reducing the risk of intimate partner violence.<sup>3</sup> Sharaunga et al. defined women's empowerment as "the multidimensional process of increasing the capacity/capabilities (i.e., resources and agency) of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes."<sup>4</sup> Sharaunga et al. further claimed that the empowerment of women can be best developed through an increase in women's capabilities.<sup>5</sup> To understand the level of empowerment of women, their access to resources and agency should be measured. Policymakers should adopt a multi-dimensional approach while considering or measuring women's empowerment to achieve the best outcomes.

Education is an important aspect of women's empowerment. The higher the woman's education qualification, the more her agency, which also leads to lower birth rates.<sup>6</sup> Gender equality is necessary for the social and economic development of a country and the welfare of the family. Women who are educated and employed are more commanding in making decisions related to the purchase of household items and occupying assets. These women can make decisions that have an impact on their lives and households.<sup>7</sup> To attain gender equality, women's empowerment should be the area of focus. Empowerment is a concept that has multiple dimensions and contexts. The meaning of empowerment varies and it shows how women acknowledge themselves. Women's empowerment includes self-efficacy, self-worth, and self-concept.<sup>8</sup>

The economic empowerment of women is essential in order to realise inclusive growth. Economic growth can be facilitated by the education and employment of women. Employment assists women in exercising choice and agency in important aspects of their lives. Although paid work outside of the home can also improve women's lives, formal, regular salaried work can alter their lives.<sup>9</sup> Education is a significant tool to promote gender equality. It is therefore increasingly important to promote women's leadership in educational institutions to enhance women's self-perception and capabilities.<sup>10</sup> Women's empowerment can be realised through an effective community of social networks, the routine dissemination of recent research, online collaborations, and virtual events.<sup>11</sup>

Women's empowerment is a very well-researched topic in its own right that has been explored by many researchers from different angles. The challenges faced by women in career advancement are well documented; however, there are few studies on the career advancement of women working in learning institutions in South Africa. For example, Kanyumba and Lourens compared career advancement for academic leaders in South Africa and Australia and concluded that Australia is advancing more rapidly in contrast to South Africa. The study suggested that more research is required to focus on the perspective of female leaders in academics to gain a better view of barriers they have faced and how other women can overcome these barriers to advance their careers.<sup>12</sup> Liani et al. recommended that studies that consider the career advancement of women in academics are required to focus on their male counterparts as well in order to drive a comparison between the two genders. This would not only provide information about the current status of diversity in higher education institutions but also useful insights into the challenges and enablers of career advancement.<sup>13</sup> Lyons

<sup>2</sup> Irshad Ahmad Reshi and T Sudha, "Women Empowerment: A Literature Review," *International Journal of Economic, Business, Accounting, Agriculture Management and Sharia Administration (IJEBAAS)* 2, no. 6 (2022): 1353–59.

<sup>3</sup> Meghna Ranganathan et al., "Associations between Women's Economic and Social Empowerment and Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from a Microfinance plus Program in Rural North West Province, South Africa," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 15–16 (2021): 7747–75.

<sup>4</sup> S Sharaunga, M Mudhara, and A Bogale, "Conceptualisation and Measurement of Women's Empowerment Revisited," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 20, no. 1 (2019): 1–25.

<sup>5</sup> Sharaunga, Mudhara, and Bogale, "Conceptualisation and Measurement of Women's Empowerment Revisited."

<sup>6</sup> Goleen Samari, "Education and Fertility in Egypt: Mediation by Women's Empowerment," *SSM-Population Health* 9 (2019): 100488.

<sup>7</sup> Huma Rehman, Dr Amani Moazzam, and Nighat Ansari, "Role of Microfinance Institutions in Women Empowerment: A Case Study of Akhuwat, Pakistan," *South Asian Studies* 30, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>8</sup> J. L. Mackey, *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realist Tradition* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Naila Kabeer, "Gender Equality, Inclusive Growth, and Labour Markets," *Women's Economic Empowerment: Insights from Africa and South Asia*, 2021, 13–48.

<sup>10</sup> Mónica Segovia-Pérez, Pilar Laguna-Sánchez, and Concepción de la Fuente-Cabrero, "Education for Sustainable Leadership: Fostering Women's Empowerment at the University Level," *Sustainability* 11, no. 20 (2019): 5555.

<sup>11</sup> Vivienne Porritt, "Women as Leaders in Education: What Works and What Must We Improve?," in *Future Alternatives for Educational Leadership* (Routledge, 2021), 126–34.

<sup>12</sup> B. Kanyumba and M.E. Lourens, "Career Development for Female Academics in Australian and South African Universities," *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* 11, no. 2 (2022): 391–401.

<sup>13</sup> Kanyumba and Lourens, "Career Development for Female Academics in Australian and South African Universities," 391–401.

recommended that such studies should be conducted on a larger sample population to understand the aspects that act as barriers to the career advancement of female academic leaders.<sup>14</sup>

Due to the abovementioned gap and recommendations from the literature, this study focused on determining the role of gender issues in the advancement of women in learning institutions in South Africa. This study aims to identify the current status of women in academic institutions, the obstacles they face, and the perspective of male employees toward female peers and superiors.

This study focuses on determining the role of gender issues in the career advancement of women in learning institutions in South Africa. It seeks to understand the perspective of male employees of their female peers. The study aims to provide insight into how the barriers faced by women employees in career advancement can be overcome and how they can take up leadership positions.

The study has been structured to achieve its overarching goal by addressing specific objectives. These include a comprehensive evaluation of the current status of women's professional advancement within South African learning institutions, the identification and analysis of obstacles impeding women's progress in achieving professional growth, and an investigation into the work environment in institutions where women hold leadership roles. Additionally, the study delves into understanding the perceptions of male employees regarding their female colleagues and superiors while also aiming to propose a practical empowerment framework tailored towards advancing women in South Africa, particularly within learning institutions. Ultimately, the study aims to provide valuable insights aimed at overcoming barriers hindering women's career progression and promoting their ascension to leadership positions within educational settings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses previous research conducted on women's representation and empowerment, as well as barriers faced by women in attaining leadership positions and current policy measures for women's empowerment.

### Women's Representation in the South African Labour Force

Women's autonomy and ability to make decisions that have a significant impact on their lives may be enhanced by paid employment.<sup>15</sup> Women's well-being, autonomy, and access to resources are affected by the labour market. The labour market influences deciding when a woman will get married and bear a child and offers the possibility of interacting with new people. Changes in trends in the labour market have the potential to dictate what women can and cannot do. Gender-based inequalities are promoted by structural factors associated with economic and well-established inequalities in the labour market. Heintz points out that separate labour markets, societal standards, disproportionate economic resources and assets, and women's major involvement in unpaid work are some of these structural aspects.<sup>16</sup> Due to the different nature of the work of men and women, the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was also experienced differently across genders. In South Africa, the impact of the pandemic on women was more pronounced during the early stages. For women, job loss was higher during the second and fourth months of 2020. A higher decline in average hours of work every week was seen for women compared to their male counterparts. There was an unparalleled increase in unpaid household work like childcare for women. These increased childcare hours further diminished the economic prospects of women.<sup>17</sup> In the context of South Africa, there was a lack of policies and interventions to address the impact of COVID-19 on women. The reviewed research affirmed that gender-based discrimination has a negative effect on the economic position of women, in their place of employment and at home. These issues demand immediate intervention on policy and practice levels.<sup>18</sup> According to Ranchhod and Daniels, women had a 50% less chance than their male counterparts of getting a job during the pandemic in South Africa.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the probability of losing a job was significantly higher for women than men. According to Roy et al., the pandemic

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<sup>14</sup> Sophia Welma Lyons et al., "Gender Perceptions Of Factors Affecting The Career Advancement Of Female Academics In South Africa" (University of Pretoria, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), *Progress of the World's Women 2015–2016: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights* (New York, USA: UN Women, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> J. Heintz, "Stalled Progress: Why Labour Markets Are Failing Women," in *Women's Economic Empowerment: Insights from Africa and South Asia*, eds. Kate Grantham, Gillian Dowie and Arjan de Haan (New York, USA: Routledge International Development Research Centre, 2021), 51-74.

<sup>17</sup> Daniela Casale and Dorrit Posel, "Gender and the Early Effects of the COVID-19 Crisis in the Paid and Unpaid Economies in South Africa," *National Income Dynamics (NIDS)-Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM) Wave 1* (2020): 1–25.

<sup>18</sup> Bianca Rochelle Parry and Errolyn Gordon, "The Shadow Pandemic: Inequitable Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 in South Africa," *Gender, Work & Organization* 28, no. 2 (2021): 795–806.

<sup>19</sup> Vimal Ranchhod and Reza Che Daniels, "Labour Market Dynamics in South Africa at the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *South African Journal of Economics* 89, no. 1 (2021): 44–62.

not only impacted economic opportunities but also increased the risk of gender-based violence.<sup>20</sup> The government did not consider gender-based violence services as essential and this led to reduced relief work towards it. The study also identified that disabled adolescent women were among the most vulnerable. There is a lack of representation of women in fields such as medicine and science. Various institutional, systemic, and cultural barriers have resulted in low levels of women recruitment and retention of women in these fields. There is an immediate need to remove these barriers with proven approaches so that half of the population can be fully mobilised in the workforce. In scholarly science and medicine, information and capability are absent regarding how to effect hierarchical change toward gender equality. A better understanding of gender stereotypes should be provided through training programmes.<sup>21</sup> Another factor that hinders the economic empowerment of women is societal norms.<sup>22</sup> Gender stereotypes are challenging to overcome as they are part of social and cultural norms. In recent decades, governments at various levels have been attempting to encourage equality among genders, as well as the empowerment of women. Pereira and Salaris confirmed the persistence of gender inequality in the labour market, despite all the encouragement.<sup>23</sup> Although South Africa has regulations to promote gender equality, women are still underrepresented in most industries. The major barriers faced by women are a lack of professional progress, lack of participation in decision-making, and unequal pay. These hurdles are created by organisational policies and immediate supervisors. An effective tool for removing these barriers for women is legislation but this alone is not sufficient. Women are required to possess the skills that could help them progress in their careers.<sup>24</sup>

Mosomi used the Post-Apartheid Labour Market Series data for the years 1993 to 2015 to examine how the gender pay gap evolved in South Africa.<sup>25</sup> The study determined that at 23% to 35%, the median pay gap between men and women was significant. In the context of South Africa, the human capital aspects are better for salaried women compared to their male counterparts. The study also revealed that the pay gap was narrowing, especially between 1993 and 2005, but in recent years, it started to increase again. According to Klasen, labour force participation is heterogeneous in developing countries.<sup>26</sup> The historic difference in female participation in the labour force is still hurting them today. Participation also depends on the financial situation of their household.

Bangani and Vyas-Doorgapersad identified the relationships between genders, financial empowerment of women, the political power of women, poverty, and violence towards women as major aspects that influence gender equality in South Africa.<sup>27</sup> They found that when women are considered for lower management levels, it has a profound impact on their long-term careers. The alternative path for women is to move from entry-level to higher management, but this requires a great deal of time and is hindered by organisational barriers. Bangani and Vyas-Doorgapersad called for reformative actions to promote gender equality in the public sector of South Africa.<sup>28</sup>

Klasen et al. studied the factors that influence women's participation in the labour force in eight developing nations.<sup>29</sup> The study concluded that barriers to women's participation in the labour market are largely country-specific. The study also found that due to increasing women's education and decreasing their fertility, women's participation in the labour force is increasing. The study called on policymakers to consider focusing on improving women's education outcomes and reducing the number of children they have in order to increase their labour force participation. This will contribute to the economic growth of the country. Asongu et al. examined the impact of globalisation on the economic participation of women in 47 countries in Africa. The study affirmed that women's economic participation is impacted positively due to the rise in the globalisation

<sup>20</sup> Charlotte M Roy et al., "Impact of COVID-19 on Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response Services in Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, and South Africa: A Cross-Sectional Survey," *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 2 (2022): 780771.

<sup>21</sup> Imogen R Coe, Ryan Wiley, and Linda-Gail Bekker, "Organisational Best Practices towards Gender Equality in Science and Medicine," *The Lancet* 393, no. 10171 (2019): 587–93.

<sup>22</sup> Rachel Marcus, "Gender, Social Norms, and Women's Economic Empowerment," *Women's Economic Empowerment*, 2021, 126–53.

<sup>23</sup> Elisabeth T Pereira and Stefano Salaris, "The Evolution of the Role of Women in Labor Markets in Developed Economies," in *Handbook of Research on Women in Management and the Global Labor Market* (IGI Global, 2019), 1–20.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Kaggwa, "Interventions to Promote Gender Equality in the Mining Sector of South Africa," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 7, no. 2 (2020): 398–404.

<sup>25</sup> Jacqueline Mosomi, *Distributional Changes in the Gender Wage Gap in the Post-Apartheid South African Labour Market*, vol. 2019 (UNU-WIDER, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2019/651-7>.

<sup>26</sup> Stephan Klasen, "What Explains Uneven Female Labor Force Participation Levels and Trends in Developing Countries?," *The World Bank Research Observer* 34, no. 2 (2019): 161–97.

<sup>27</sup> Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad and Ayola Bangani, "The Implementation of Gender Equality within the South African Public Service (1994–2019)," *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 8, no. 1 (2020): 1–10.

<sup>28</sup> Vyas-Doorgapersad and Bangani, "The Implementation of Gender Equality within the South African Public Service (1994–2019)."

<sup>29</sup> Klasen, "What Explains Uneven Female Labor Force Participation Levels and Trends in Developing Countries?"

index. The female workforce participation is driven by the social component of globalisation and decreased by the political aspects of globalisation. The study suggested that further research should be conducted to better understand how the political aspect of globalisation can be improved to increase women's economic empowerment.<sup>30</sup> Concerned about the underrepresentation of women in senior scientific positions, Liani et al. looked to the literature for answers. They found that gender roles and social factors are to blame for the lack of advancement of women in senior positions in science.<sup>31</sup>

### **Barriers Faced by Women in Attaining Leadership Positions**

The concept of women's empowerment cannot be realised until the participation of women in leadership positions is ensured. The number of women directors is increasing, yet they are not equally represented in the higher management of organisations. The major challenge for women in climbing the corporate ladder is the societal expectations that associate leadership qualities with men. A significant role is played by gender stereotyping in establishing the superiority of men in society, which leads to an unequal relationship among the genders. This has a profound impact on performance and perceived status and works to the disadvantage of women.<sup>32</sup> Established male-dominant hierarchies act as a barrier for women to be leaders for sustainable development. Major challenges for female leaders are family commitments, self-belief, and gender-specific norms. Ecofeminism and political feminist ecology support the notion that the down-to-earth perspective of women and their position of authority contribute to making them effective leaders for sustainable development. The study also identified that men can support women in an organisational setting to attain leadership positions. The push for female leadership is also required to come from policymakers.<sup>33</sup> Hamlet et al. acknowledged that the barriers and benefits associated with women in leadership have been extensively studied, but that there is a lack of perspective on the role of empowerment. Hamlet et al. identified that factors such as the ability of women to speak in community meetings make significant contributions to women's empowerment. They identified household work and not receiving technical training and support from local authorities as major barriers for female leaders.<sup>34</sup>

McCullough conducted research on the current status of female leadership in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and examined the percentage of female leaders in various STEM academic institutions across the United States of America (USA). The study proportionated the number of leadership positions held by women with the number of doctorates held by women in the same field and identified that there is a gap between the two. McCullough suggested that future studies should determine the reasons behind the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in STEM fields.<sup>35</sup> Shava et al. conducted a study on the leadership of women in schools in Zimbabwe. They identified that women leaders face barriers associated with economic, cultural, and social aspects. An interesting contradiction is that the majority of professionals working in this sector are women, but they are led by men. Women are being discriminated against as a result of social biases and stereotypes that persist in the majority of schools and communities. Another issue that the study pointed out is the lack of social validation for female leaders, as they are not able to make enough time for their children.<sup>36</sup>

To determine the status of female leadership in American surgery, Pories et al. conducted a literature review. Their study affirmed that the number of women in leadership positions in surgery is constantly increasing. There is an interesting realisation by the leading institutions associated with surgery that the leadership capabilities of women are something they can explore.<sup>37</sup> A cause of concern is that women belonging to minorities are still underrepresented in leadership positions. This can be addressed by promoting employment and mentorship to the underrepresented minority of women. Another barrier associated with women in

<sup>30</sup> Simplice A. Asongu et al., "Globalisation and Female Economic Participation in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Gender Issues* 37 (2020): 61–89.

<sup>31</sup> Millicent L Liani, Isaac K Nyamongo, and Rachel Tolhurst, "Understanding Intersecting Gender Inequities in Academic Scientific Research Career Progression in Sub-Saharan Africa," 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Tahani Alqahtani, "Barriers to Women's Leadership," *Granite Journal: A Postgraduate Interdisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 2 (2019): 34–41.

<sup>33</sup> Xoco A Shinbrot et al., "Unlocking Women's Sustainability Leadership Potential: Perceptions of Contributions and Challenges for Women in Sustainable Development," *World Development* 119 (2019): 120–32.

<sup>34</sup> Leigh Hamlet et al., "Barriers to Women's Participation, Leadership, and Empowerment in Community-Managed Water and Sanitation in Rural Bolivia," *H2Open Journal* 5, no. 3 (2022): 532–48.

<sup>35</sup> Laura McCullough, "Proportions of Women in STEM Leadership in the Academy in the USA," *Education Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2019): 1.

<sup>36</sup> M Mpofo, "Challenges Facing Women in School Leadership Positions: Experiences from a District in Zimbabwe," *Leadership* 10 (2019): 14.

<sup>37</sup> Susan E Pories et al., "Leadership in American Surgery: Women Are Rising to the Top," *Annals of Surgery* 269, no. 2 (2019): 199–205.

leadership is household responsibilities and childcare. To get a better perspective on this, Choudhary employed regressive analysis. The study found an inverse relationship between childcare costs and the number of women in leadership in selected S&P 500 organisations. When a child is still a baby, childcare costs especially hinder female managers' careers. When the child reaches preschool age or beyond, the impact is much less pronounced.<sup>38</sup> Ellinas et al. conducted a qualitative study to examine challenges associated with promotions. In the context of women, the study claimed that the challenges are internal. The major barrier for women is work overload in their current role, which keeps them from advancing their careers. There is a need to reduce the work overload on female workers.<sup>39</sup>

For the identification of challenges faced by conservation leaders in the USA, Jones and Solomon conducted a qualitative study and interviewed 56 female leaders. The majority of the participants reported that the barriers they faced were pay discrimination, inability to negotiate, official and non-official exclusion, a deficient response from the organisation, and questions about the efficiency and credibility of decisions made by female leaders. The study stressed the need for more work on impactful strategies so that leadership is more diverse.<sup>40</sup> Discussing the state of women in the hospitality industry, Dashper pointed out that career advancement opportunities for women are limited due to the existence of a glass ceiling in the industry. The study adopted a qualitative method to examine women's mentoring programmes. The major challenge women face in navigating their careers in the hospitality industry is the tendency of organisations to favour men. This could be overcome by promoting mentoring programmes as they offer aid to women who are starting careers in the hospitality industry. Mentoring would also enable women to defy gender-based discrimination in the industry.<sup>41</sup> According to Porritt, gender plays an elemental role in the career advancement and retention of female educators. Porritt's study acknowledges the existence of a substantial pay gap and lack of flexibility for women. Having a role model, however, can be effective in inspiring the next generation of women. Furthermore, Porritt identified various structural and supervisory challenges such as unfairness and prejudice. Their employers do not offer adequate workplace training to female educators.<sup>42</sup>

Laws and regulations have been implemented in South Africa to promote women's empowerment. Muberekwa and Nkomo conducted a qualitative study to examine the perceptions of nine female academicians of women's empowerment and the transforming role of women. They concluded that the challenges faced by women in academics are similar to the challenges faced in other work settings. These barriers are due to patriarchy and the fact that universities are not changing rapidly. Women face sexism as their competency and self-worth are questioned. The work demands are immense for academic women. The study pointed out a need for male partners to help with household work.<sup>43</sup> To gain a better understanding of leadership programmes for women at universities, Segovia-Pérez et al. conducted research using a mixed methodology. The study acknowledged the significance of these programmes in incorporating knowledge and skills associated with leadership in the students, and that training helps in building confidence among young students. To overcome the barriers associated with female leadership, such initiatives should thus be taken.<sup>44</sup>

### **Current Policy Measures to Ensure Women's Empowerment in South Africa**

Various policy and legislative measures have been adopted in South Africa to ensure women's empowerment. These include the Labour Relations Act (No. 66 of 1995), the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) and the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill (2014). The literature provides mixed evidence on the effectiveness of these Acts.

South Africa used a legislative path to provide for the rights of women and the participation of women in political decision-making processes; however, these policies have not been very effective for the black and rural women of South Africa. Due to societal norms, a gender gap in the workplace, poverty among women,

<sup>38</sup> Amod Choudhary, "Is Childcare Cost a Barrier to Women Managers' Retention and Progress at Large Firms?," *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 41, no. 2 (2022): 241–53.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth H Ellinas et al., "No Room to 'Lean in': A Qualitative Study on Gendered Barriers to Promotion and Leadership," *Journal of Women's Health* 28, no. 3 (2019): 393–402.

<sup>40</sup> Megan S Jones and Jennifer Solomon, "Challenges and Supports for Women Conservation Leaders," *Conservation Science and Practice* 1, no. 6 (2019): e36.

<sup>41</sup> Katherine Dashper, "Mentoring for Gender Equality: Supporting Female Leaders in the Hospitality Industry," *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 88 (2020): 102397.

<sup>42</sup> Porritt, "Women as Leaders in Education: What Works and What Must We Improve?"

<sup>43</sup> Evelyn Muberekwa and Thobeka Nkomo, "Exploring the Perceptions of Wits Academic Women about Women Empowerment and the Changing Roles of Women in 21st-Century South Africa," *SAGE Open* 6, no. 4 (2016): 2158244016675014.

<sup>44</sup> Segovia-Pérez, Laguna-Sánchez, and de la Fuente-Cabrero, "Education for Sustainable Leadership: Fostering Women's Empowerment at the University Level."

and gender-based violence persist.<sup>45</sup> The goal of the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill of 2014 is to support the rights of women and to provide avenues for gender equality and the empowerment of women; however, just passing legislation cannot be expected to overcome the barriers associated with gender inequality. The more important aspect is having the political will to promote gender equality and to improve future policymaking for gender equality.<sup>46</sup> The Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill determines the values and fundamentals that need to be unified with policies in both the public and private sectors to provide equality among the genders and has the goal of providing half of the representation in executive bodies of companies to women. South Africa has made significant advancements in women's empowerment and the promotion of gender-based equality and shows concern for the private sector as progress in this direction for the private sector is slow.<sup>47</sup>

To curb gender inequality, South Africa put in place the Employment Equity Act. This Act made it mandatory for organisations to disclose participation and pay based on gender. To gain more insight, Espi et al. examined the reported data from organisations for the year 2015 to 2016. Women, particularly black women, continue to be underrepresented in managerial and high-skilled positions. The study also identified gender-based differences in remuneration but also pointed out that the data for remuneration were inconsistent. In order to gain a clear picture of the position of women in the South African labour market, Espi et al. recommended that organisations must ensure that the data are consistent.<sup>48</sup> The role of government policies and development in the empowerment of women is very significant. In South Africa, the participation of women in the economy increased by approximately 9% in rural areas after access to electricity was provided. This also increased the working hours of female employees in rural settings.<sup>49</sup> According to Mukorera, South Africa has implemented various policies to reduce gender inequality, but it persists.<sup>50</sup> The impact of numerous laws is not profound and universal for all women in South Africa as marginalised women tend to benefit less from these policies. Mukorera tested the relationship between entrepreneurship and women's empowerment in South Africa. The results revealed that women's empowerment can be promoted by entrepreneurship, and the study recommended that policymakers should focus more on providing support to entrepreneurial initiatives for female entrepreneurs in South Africa. This would lead to the economic empowerment of women.<sup>51</sup>

According to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the government of South Africa is obliged to promote the empowerment of women and eliminate gender inequalities. UNIDO pointed out that women's empowerment is not profound if one looks beyond strategic initiatives. The barriers faced by women in terms of economic empowerment differ based on factors such as poverty and race. UNIDO listed a lack of knowledge of policy initiatives, limited access to technologies, limited skills and technical knowledge, inaccessibility of capital, and limited social networks as major barriers to empowering women. Despite these barriers, UNIDO mentioned various opportunities for women's empowerment.<sup>52</sup> Walters et al. affirmed that numerous legislative interventions are employed to address gender inequalities in South Africa. To promote social change and women's empowerment, these policies provide mandatory quotas for women. Despite these legislative interventions, gender equality in the labour market is far from realised, and whatever advancements have been made in past decades are at risk due to this insufficient change. Culture plays a more significant role in women's empowerment than policy.<sup>53</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

To better understand how people envision and experience female advancement in learning institutions, the research used a primary data-gathering technique. Using primary data-collection techniques to obtain raw data that are suited to the goals of a study is very beneficial. Since primary data are obtained using a primary data-

<sup>45</sup> Yolanda Sadie, "Gender Policy and Legislation during the First 20 Years of Democracy," *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 36, no. 2 (2014).

<sup>46</sup> Nonhlanhla Sibanda, "Challenges and Prospects of the South African Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill," 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Janine Hills, "Addressing Gender Quotas in South Africa: Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Legislation," *Deakin L. Rev.* 20 (2015): 153.

<sup>48</sup> Gabriel Espi, David Francis, and Imraan Valodia, "Gender Inequality in the South African Labour Market: Insights from the Employment Equity Act Data," *Agenda* 33, no. 4 (2019): 44–61.

<sup>49</sup> Anna Fruttero et al., *Women in the Labor Force: The Role of Fiscal Policies* (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Sophia Ze Mukorera, "Is Entrepreneurship the Solution for Female Empowerment in South Africa," *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship* 25, no. 01 (2020): 2050003.

<sup>51</sup> Mukorera, "Is Entrepreneurship the Solution for Female Empowerment in South Africa."

<sup>52</sup> UNIDO, "Policy Assessment for the Economic Empowerment of Women in Green Industry," UNIDO, 2021, accessed May 10, 2023, [https://www.unido.org/sites/default/files/files/2021-06/SouthAfrica\\_Executive%20Summary\\_Final\\_0.pdf](https://www.unido.org/sites/default/files/files/2021-06/SouthAfrica_Executive%20Summary_Final_0.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> Cyrill Walters et al., "The Impact of the Pandemic-Enforced Lockdown on the Scholarly Productivity of Women Academics in South Africa," *Research Policy* 51, no. 1 (2022): 104403.

collection method for the first time, the data are in accordance with the targets and purposes of the study.<sup>54</sup> A qualitative data-collection tool was chosen to achieve the objectives of this study. A subjective method to conduct research that can improve discoveries is referred to as a qualitative methodology.<sup>55</sup> This investigation employed an interpretivist research framework because it used a qualitative approach to data analysis. Reality and achievement, as per interpretivism, are contextual, as well as traditionally and historically situated and reflect personal opinions and domain competence. The gathering, evaluation, and analysis of information can ultimately be influenced by researchers since they are never completely free from their own thoughts and perspectives.<sup>56</sup> This study used a descriptive research strategy in addition to the interpretivism research philosophy. It is common practice to use a descriptive research approach to describe actual, instructive acts as they take place.

This study's target population included both women and men in learning institutions in South Africa. The participants were chosen using a deliberate non-probability selection technique. To choose participants according to the parameters, the researcher used the purposive sampling technique.<sup>57</sup> The study encompassed a restricted participant pool, consisting of 20 individuals, comprising 8 males and 12 females.

To analyse the collected data, the study utilised thematic analysis, which is a technique for identifying and evaluating noteworthy themes in data.<sup>58</sup> Using the thematic analysis approach enabled the researcher to identify recurrent themes from the replies gathered through interviews.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Status of Women's Professional Advancement in South African Learning Institutions

Regarding the status of women's professional advancement in South African learning institutions, Duflo and Doepke et al.<sup>59</sup> observed that in all nations and over the centuries, there has been a significant relationship between the proportion of women in society and the pace of economic development. This growth indicates that decision-makers have started to understand the substantial correlation between women's empowerment and economic growth. Concerning the relevance of this relationship, women's rights will not only serve as a good aim on their own, but also as an instrument for achieving economic progress. The advancement of women has grown into a key component of policy and strategy. According to this study's findings, women's professional growth in South African educational institutions is of good quality. A participant noted that there are numerous options for women to advance their careers in South Africa.

According to the participants, many powerful roles including those of chancellor and dean at academic institutions are held by women. However, this study result is not in line with that of Ranchhod and Daniels, who stated that women in South Africa had a 50% lower probability than men of getting employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to men, women also had a considerably higher chance of losing their jobs.<sup>60</sup> It emerged from this study's results that women are making significant progress in their career growth across a range of roles, where they hold significant decision-making positions. These results are not in line with those of Shober, who revealed that women are significantly less likely to receive promotions to senior management or professorship roles both worldwide and in South Africa, and when they are, they often struggle to be recognised in these posts.<sup>61</sup>

Both racial and gender-related restrictions appear to spread the limits. On average, they are given more trust and accountability. This is especially notable as South African educational institutions work together to establish women's equal rights and opportunities. This is clear throughout all stages of public and private educational institutions across the country. Universities and colleges are copying one another as a result of the success of this effort. These results contradict those of Pereira and Salaris, who revealed that given that women

<sup>54</sup> T. Miller et al., *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> Caroline A Jackson et al., "Moderate Agreement between Self-Reported Stroke and Hospital-Recorded Stroke in Two Cohorts of Australian Women: A Validation Study," *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 15 (2015): 1–10.

<sup>56</sup> Gemma Ryan, "Introduction to Positivism, Interpretivism and Critical Theory," *Nurse Researcher* 25, no. 4 (2018): 41–49.

<sup>57</sup> Hannele Saunders, Lynn Gallagher-Ford, and Katri Vehviläinen-Julkunen, "Endorsement and Validation of the Essential Evidence-based Practice Competencies for Practicing Nurses in Finland: An Argument Delphi Study," *Worldviews on Evidence-Based Nursing* 16, no. 4 (2019): 281–88.

<sup>58</sup> V Clarke, V Braun, and N Hayfield, *Thematic Analysis. Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, vol. 3, 2015, 222–248.

<sup>59</sup> Esther Duflo, "Women Empowerment and Economic Development," *Journal of Economic Literature* 50, no. 4 (2012): 1051–79; Matthias Doepke, Michele Tertilt, and Alessandra Voena, "The Economics and Politics of Women's Rights," *Annu. Rev. Econ.* 4, no. 1 (2012): 339–72.

<sup>60</sup> Ranchhod and Daniels, "Labour Market Dynamics in South Africa at the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic."

<sup>61</sup> Dianne Shober, "Women in Higher Education in South Africa," in *Gender Transformation in the Academy*, vol. 19 (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014), 315–32.



are ingrained in social as well as cultural conventions, gender roles are difficult to dispel.<sup>62</sup> The government at all levels has been working to promote gender parity and women's empowerment in recent years. Notwithstanding all the incentives, Pereira and Salaris found that gender discrimination still exists in the labour market, which is not at all similar to the findings of this study.

Previous research studies critically highlighted that female participants expressed serious concerns about the barriers preventing their progress in South Africa's higher education system, citing gender as the key factor that limited their chances for career-associated advancement. Women in senior management roles spoke out specifically about the challenges they encountered when attempting to fit into patriarchal surroundings. They cited both blatant disparagement and the stress of putting aside family obligations in order to attend male-oriented community engagements.<sup>63</sup> This study discovered an entirely different scenario, where women were encouraged to take up management positions in educational institutions.

### **The Obstacles Encountered by Women in Attaining Professional Advancement in Learning Institutions**

As observed in the literature review, Alqahtani suggested that women's empowerment as a concept cannot be fulfilled until their representation in leadership roles is guaranteed.<sup>64</sup> Although there are more female managers, they are not considered equal at the top levels of organisations' management. The cultural expectations that equate leadership skills with men present the biggest obstacle for women who are trying to advance their careers. Gender stereotypes which result in an unhealthy relationship between men and women play a crucial part in creating the supremacy of men in society. To the detriment of women, this has a major effect on productivity and perceived worth. Concerning the obstacles faced by women in the setting of this study, a few participants indicated that women do not encounter any barriers to achieving professional advancement at academic institutions. This finding is contradictory to the findings of several research scholars who believe that women face numerous barriers to advancing their careers. For instance, Shinbrot et al. and Hamlet et al. stated that women are prevented from holding positions of leadership in environmental sustainability by the existing male-dominated hierarchy.<sup>65</sup> Family obligations, self-belief, and gender-specific conventions are major obstacles for female leaders. The idea that women make excellent leaders for sustainability because of their practical perspective and positions of authority is supported by ecofeminism and a social feminist environment. Shinbrot et al. and Hamlet et al.'s research additionally discovered that men can assist women in achieving leadership positions in an organisational setting and recommended that governments must also support the need for female leadership.<sup>66</sup> This was also revealed in the present research context, wherein it was affirmed that the main challenges faced by women in achieving career progression in educational institutions include a variety of personal reasons and a lack of assistance. Major challenges are also posed by cultural issues, with sexual harassment standing out as the most notable one. This was also described by Muberekwa and Nkomo, who confirmed that women in academia face similar difficulties to those they encounter in other types of workplaces.<sup>67</sup> Both patriarchal structures and the slow pace of change in colleges are to blame for these impediments. Women's competence and self-worth are challenged, and they are forced to deal with sexism. Professional women face enormous job pressures, and Muberekwa and Nkomo made clear the importance of male partners helping out with family obligations.<sup>68</sup>

The results also revealed that everyone has different challenges throughout their lives, some of which are exclusive to women, some to men, as well as to each individual. It all depends on how people react to their challenges. Patriarchal society is currently less common than it was previously in South Africa. The current generation of women, especially those who live in cities, ought to be able to reach any level of success they desire. Being a woman should not be seen as a hindrance or an excuse for not attaining one's life objectives. In this context, as revealed in the literature review, Espi et al. highlighted that the Employment Equity Act was

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<sup>62</sup> Pereira and Salaris, "The Evolution of the Role of Women in Labor Markets in Developed Economies."

<sup>63</sup> Parry and Gordon, "The Shadow Pandemic: Inequitable Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 in South Africa"; Ranchhod and Daniels, "Labour Market Dynamics in South Africa at the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic."

<sup>64</sup> Alqahtani, "Barriers to Women's Leadership."

<sup>65</sup> Shinbrot et al., "Unlocking Women's Sustainability Leadership Potential: Perceptions of Contributions and Challenges for Women in Sustainable Development"; Hamlet et al., "Barriers to Women's Participation, Leadership, and Empowerment in Community-Managed Water and Sanitation in Rural Bolivia."

<sup>66</sup> Shinbrot et al., "Unlocking Women's Sustainability Leadership Potential: Perceptions of Contributions and Challenges for Women in Sustainable Development"; Hamlet et al., "Barriers to Women's Participation, Leadership, and Empowerment in Community-Managed Water and Sanitation in Rural Bolivia."

<sup>67</sup> Muberekwa and Nkomo, "Exploring the Perceptions of Wits Academic Women about Women Empowerment and the Changing Roles of Women in 21st-Century South Africa."

<sup>68</sup> Muberekwa and Nkomo, "Exploring the Perceptions of Wits Academic Women about Women Empowerment and the Changing Roles of Women in 21st-Century South Africa."

implemented in South Africa to combat gender discrimination. Companies must now disclose gender-based engagement and remuneration in accordance with this law.<sup>69</sup>

### **The Work Environment in Learning Institutions when Women are in Leadership Positions**

Joecks, Pull and Vetter, and Campbell and Vera have noted that female leaders have specific advantages and are equipped with indisputable intrinsic qualities such as being team players and having sensitivity and awareness that function as the cornerstone of the present leadership paradigm.<sup>70</sup> Numerous factors within organisations, including the company's financial results, the firm value, advancement, economic expansion, social adjustment, philanthropic work, and default risk, have been identified as improving with the increment in the participation of women in organisational leadership positions, according to studies and polls conducted globally.<sup>71</sup> In this study, one of the participants indicated that when women assume leadership positions, there is a culture of rivalry that makes the workplace unfriendly. In contrast, some participants stated that the work climate is supportive and that women have many opportunities. In this context, Toh and Leonardelli suggested that women became great leaders in some countries where they have historically been viewed as inferior to men in leadership roles. According to Toh and Leonardelli, in typically restrictive societies, the strength of social norms and penalties precludes developments that would traditionally place men in leadership roles.<sup>72</sup> Fewer women would rise to the top in groups that are more tightly knit. Furthermore, cultural rigidity has a limiting effect on how much inclusive traditions, where people of both genders are treated equally, allow women to rise to positions of leadership.<sup>73</sup>

The results also confirmed that this relies on individual features. The participant added that women who feel mistreated might take a harsh approach to leadership. The suggestion was made that women should not consistently use the gender card as it might be seen as them being insecure about their value and need to impress men all the time. In this context, Barrett and Davidson affirmed that social roles and differences in gender interaction present problems, particularly for women. Women are reprimanded for exhibiting either excessive or insufficient desire, tenacity, and self-confidence due to gender inequalities and preconceptions; for example, a woman's speech is typically less formal, friendlier, and more reasonable than a man's.<sup>74</sup> This type of communication typically lowers assumptions about the skills that women possess.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, a woman's likeability, effect, and authority may be reduced if she exhibits a great deal of aggression that defies the stereotype. Women's abilities are evaluated differently from men's abilities. Culture evaluates women's abilities more rigorously than men, keeps women with a considerable amount of experience, and examines female managers and executives more realistically than male leaders holding comparable positions.<sup>76</sup>

Similarly, in the context of culture, as observed in the literature review, Walters et al. revealed that South Africa uses a variety of legislative initiatives to combat gender inequality.<sup>77</sup> In order to support social transformation and women's empowerment, these policies set required mandates for women. Notwithstanding these legislative initiatives, gender equality in the workplace is still a long way off, and any progress made in previous decades is now in danger as a result of this inadequate transformation. As a result, culture rather than policy is more important in empowering women. To help meet the needs of women, educational leaders must increase access to daycare and promote job mobility.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Espi, Francis, and Valodia, "Gender Inequality in the South African Labour Market: Insights from the Employment Equity Act Data," 44 -61.

<sup>70</sup> Jasmin Joecks, Kerstin Pull, and Karin Vetter, "Gender Diversity in the Boardroom and Firm Performance: What Exactly Constitutes a 'Critical Mass?'" *Journal of Business Ethics* 118 (2013): 61–72; Kevin Campbell and Antonio Minguez Vera, "Female Board Appointments and Firm Valuation: Short and Long-Term Effects," *Journal of Management & Governance* 14 (2010): 37–59.

<sup>71</sup> Joecks, Pull, and Vetter, "Gender Diversity in the Boardroom and Firm Performance: What Exactly Constitutes a 'Critical Mass?'"

<sup>72</sup> Soo Min Toh and Geoffrey J Leonardelli, "Cultural Constraints on the Emergence of Women as Leaders," *Journal of World Business* 47, no. 4 (2012): 604–11.

<sup>73</sup> Toh and Leonardelli, "Cultural Constraints on the Emergence of Women as Leaders," 604-611.

<sup>74</sup> Marilyn J Davidson and Mary Barrett, *Gender and Communication at Work* (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>75</sup> Merida L Johns, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Structural, Cultural, and Organizational Barriers Preventing Women from Achieving Senior and Executive Positions," *Perspectives in Health Information Management/AHIMA, American Health Information Management Association* 10, no. Winter (2013).

<sup>76</sup> Johns, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Structural, Cultural, and Organizational Barriers Preventing Women from Achieving Senior and Executive Positions."

<sup>77</sup> Walters et al., "The Impact of the Pandemic-Enforced Lockdown on the Scholarly Productivity of Women Academics in South Africa."

<sup>78</sup> Walters et al., "The Impact of the Pandemic-Enforced Lockdown on the Scholarly Productivity of Women Academics in South Africa."

### **Perceptions of Male Employees of Women as their Colleagues and Superiors**

According to Eagly and Karau, views of women's gender positions play a role in the dearth of female leaders.<sup>79</sup> Women create a characteristically poor impression of being compassionate, weak, hesitant, sensitive, and temperamental, which they have earned as a result of the long-standing roles they perform in civilisation. These presumptions frequently transfer to the profession, where men are generally seen as having the strength, reason, and ability to make decisions, while women are frequently seen as lacking these qualities. The study claimed that male workers' perceptions of female co-workers and superiors were that they were kind and polite. As a consequence of men realising that women can achieve more if given the chance, roles are shifting. Important professional relationships that are free of sexism and masculinity are required for this. However, it is clear from the literature review that important factors that affect women's rights in South Africa include the interaction between the sexes, the economic empowerment of women, the political authority of women, unemployment, and violence against women. The study discovered that women's long-term careers are significantly impacted when they are considered for lower managerial positions. Moving from the entry level to upper management is the alternative route for women, but it requires a great deal of patience and is often hampered by organisational impediments. Bangani and Vyas-Doorgapersad recommended that radical changes be made to advance women's rights in the South African government sector.<sup>80</sup> Supporting Bangani and Vyas-Doorgapersad's finding, one of the interviewees, who refuted all these claims, acknowledged widespread harassment and a toxic environment. In this context, Kaggwa suggested that women's inability to advance professionally, not being involved in decision-making, and unequal remuneration are their main obstacles.<sup>81</sup> Organisational culture and direct supervisors are responsible for creating these barriers. Although the law is a useful instrument to address these obstacles for women, it is insufficient on its own. Women are expected to possess the abilities that could advance their professions.<sup>82</sup>

Male employees in this study held positive attitudes toward female co-workers and supervisors. Although it was stated that the female members are pleasant, courteous, and supportive, it was also mentioned that women often experience jealousy. Additionally, there has been a fall in patriarchy. These study results do not align with those of Kiser, who revealed that when employment is hard to come by, men are much more inclined to think they are entitled to jobs.<sup>83</sup> More often than men, women agreed that the best way for a woman to be autonomous is to have a job. Men believed they were superior political leaders to women, and also thought they made superior corporate executives. When asked whether women made more money than men, there was no clear differentiation.<sup>84</sup>

Manne affirmed that it is possible to draw on a belief shared by many companies and social scientists that corporate culture and the impact it has on women choosing leadership posts must receive critical attention. Investigations should also consider the ontology of the procedures and structures, which include social influences and both private and public cultural views of authority and management, in relation to the procedures and schemes' paradigm.<sup>85</sup>

### **Viable Framework for Empowering Women in South Africa and Particularly Learning Institutions**

As observed in the review of the literature, gender equality is considered to be a fundamental basic right by the UN and is necessary for a society to be peaceful and prosperous.<sup>86</sup> As defined by Reshi and Sudha, women's empowerment refers to the act of giving them access to political participation, career opportunities, healthcare, and schooling so they may take control of their lives and futures.<sup>87</sup> For women to be able to access the aforementioned, many institutional and cultural barriers must be removed. The growing political participation brought about by women's empowerment may help to further lessen prejudice based on gender. The entire society therefore benefits from the empowerment of women.<sup>88</sup>

This study concluded that women already have positions of influence; they must just take advantage of the opportunities that are given to them and a directing framework must be offered. A paradigm that

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<sup>79</sup> Alice H Eagly and Steven J Karau, "Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice toward Female Leaders.," *Psychological Review* 109, no. 3 (2002): 573.

<sup>80</sup> Vyas-Doorgapersad and Bangani, "The Implementation of Gender Equality within the South African Public Service (1994–2019)."

<sup>81</sup> Kaggwa, "Interventions to Promote Gender Equality in the Mining Sector of South Africa."

<sup>82</sup> Kaggwa, "Interventions to Promote Gender Equality in the Mining Sector of South Africa."

<sup>83</sup> Angelina I T Kiser, "Workplace and Leadership Perceptions between Men and Women," *Gender in Management: An International Journal* 30, no. 8 (2015): 598–612.

<sup>84</sup> Kiser, "Workplace and Leadership Perceptions..." 598-612.

<sup>85</sup> Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>86</sup> UN, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment."

<sup>87</sup> Reshi and Sudha, "Women Empowerment..." 1353-1359.

<sup>88</sup> Reshi and Sudha, "Women Empowerment..." 1353-1359.

acknowledges and values women's achievements and endeavours must be constructed. Porritt in this context stated that a strong social network community, regular broadcasts of fresh research, online partnerships, and virtual gatherings can all contribute to the empowerment of women.<sup>89</sup>

Women must be given opportunities to speak up by starting programmes and having group discussions about the difficulties they face in their personal and professional lives. It is important to encourage and observe movements. Real occupations are starting now, and more duties must be completed before women can gain more control and domination within educational institutions. The foundation of women's empowerment in South Africa must also focus on putting an end to patriarchy. This finding is similar to that of Dashper, who pointed out that career advancement opportunities for women are limited due to the existence of a glass ceiling in industries. Dashper's study adopted a qualitative method to examine women's mentoring programmes. The major challenge women face in navigating their careers is the tendency of organisations to favour men. This could be overcome by promoting mentoring programmes as they offer aid to women who are starting their careers. Mentoring also enables women to defy gender-based discrimination in industries.<sup>90</sup>

Furthermore, as observed in the literature review, several policies and bills have been proposed to develop a viable framework for empowering women in South Africa. For instance, Sibanda affirmed that the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill seeks to promote women's rights, pathways for equality of the sexes, and women's empowerment. Nevertheless, the researcher highlighted that it is unrealistic to believe that simply introducing legislation will remove the obstacles caused by gender disparity. Possessing a moral intent to advance gender parity and future legislation for women's rights is more crucial.<sup>91</sup> Similar to this study's results, Hills noted that in order to ensure gender equality, the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill identified the values and principles that are required to be incorporated into governmental and private policy initiatives. This Bill seeks to provide women with a 50% representation rate in corporate executive committees. Hills confirmed that South Africa has made important strides in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.<sup>92</sup>

## **SUMMARY**

This study's findings showed that there are many options for women to improve their careers in South African educational institutions and that they have acquired a number of leadership positions. They are also given additional trust and more responsibility. Some individuals believe that there are no barriers that prevent women from achieving professional advancement in educational institutions, whereas other participants claimed that these barriers are primarily caused by individual matters, a lack of assistance, cultural problems, and sexual misconduct concerns. When women hold leadership positions, the perception of the workplace climate is ambiguous. While some participants claimed that jealousy made the workplace unfriendly, others thought that the workplace was welcoming and offered possibilities for female co-workers to progress. It was also discovered that male workers were at ease with, polite to, and appreciative of female co-workers and supervisors and that there is a perceived decline in patriarchy. Despite this, some women continue to encounter toxicity and harassment in the workplace. Finally, it was asserted that the paradigm for empowering women in South Africa must focus on taking advantage of opportunities, offering a guiding structure, rewarding efforts and achievements, and decreasing patriarchy.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Given the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed that aim to address the issues pertaining to gender equality in learning institutions in South Africa.

1. The encouragement of women who are seeking leadership roles should be aggressively promoted by academic institutions in South Africa. This can be achieved by offering mentoring and training programmes to assist women in acquiring the abilities required for leadership positions.
2. Educational institutions must work on policies to provide equivalent financing and facilities. Academic establishments should give men and women the same financial support and materials, which may include funding for innovations, research and development, and career advancement.
3. Addressing sexual discrimination is important. Whether it exists in the coursework, policy, or practices of an educational establishment, gender discrimination must be recognised and addressed. This may entail

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<sup>89</sup> Porritt, "Women as Leaders in Education," 126-134.

<sup>90</sup> Dashper, "Mentoring for Gender Equality," 102397.

<sup>91</sup> Sibanda, "Challenges and prospects of the South African Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill".

<sup>92</sup> Hills, "Addressing Gender Quotas in South Africa," 153-184.

promoting the use of terminology that is more comprehensive and inclusive, removing preconceptions and unconscious prejudices, and combatting implicit bias.

4. Because of cultural and societal demands, women often struggle to find work-life balance. Regulations that promote women's work-life balance, including flexible work schedules, telecommuting choices, and daycare assistance, should be given top priority by academic institutions.
5. Women frequently do not have the same access to networking that men do to develop their careers. Women should therefore be given the chance to network with mentors, business pioneers, and other experts in academic institutions in order to form connections and learn new skills.
6. Organisations should commend and respect the accomplishments of women at all levels. Women's accomplishments and efforts are valued more when they are acknowledged, which fosters the development of strong social networks. Educational institutions must work on encouraging the efforts and accomplishments of both men and women.

## CONCLUSION

This study sought to unveil the role of gender issues in the professional advancement of women in learning institutions. Furthermore, it aimed to comprehend the status of women's professional advancement in South African learning institutions and to reveal the obstacles encountered by women in attaining professional advancement in these institutions. The study examined the work environment in learning institutions when women are in leadership positions and acquired the perceptions of male employees towards women as their colleagues and superiors. It aimed to propagate a viable framework for empowering women in South Africa, particularly in learning institutions. Policymakers and administrators of educational institutions who want to enhance the long-term viability, profitability, efficacy, and performance of educational institutions for monetary gains and the uplifting of the female population will consider the findings of this research important. This research offers a thorough insight into how men and women are viewed in regard to educational institutions in South Africa. Moreover, administrators of educational institutions can have an important impact on improving inclusion, thereby culminating in the growth and development of women by integrating appropriate policies. The study provides a strong foundation for similar future research, which is required to develop and address the challenges and barriers to women's professional advancement. This study pointed out issues with current procedures and methods that need to be addressed. The study also sought to inform its audience of the benefits of gender equality incorporation in South African educational institutions. In addition to exploring the social and practical aspects of the current status of women's career advancement in South African learning institutions, this investigation provides the basis for investigating the advantages, barriers, enablers, and approaches to women's advancement. It also encourages scholars and researchers to acknowledge current limitations and develop new approaches to overcome them. The study is of immense importance for future research scholars who aim to conduct studies in the domain of women's professional development in South African educational institutions.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

The data for the study was gathered through an interview survey, and the results were analysed using a thematic approach. The predisposition of the interviewer may have caused manipulation of the data recorded and obtained, which is one drawback of these procedures. Secondly, the study focused only on gender inequality and the professional advancement of women in learning institutions in South Africa; its recommendations, therefore, do not apply to other industries or regions with different political, financial, and geographical circumstances. Future research studies can thus be conducted to assess the domain of women's professional development in other private and public sectors, as well as in other nations, to draw comparable findings and insights. Research can be conducted to comprehend the professional advancement of women and the concept of gender inequality in both developing and developed nations to gather relevant information to address the problems that women are facing.

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## ABOUT AUTHOR

Dr. Dee Khosa is a young hardworking academic professional who always aspires to accomplish goals by gaining knowledge and insight into opportunities presented. She holds qualifications in: Doctor of Literature and Philosophy in Police Science from the University of South Africa (UNISA) and a National Diploma: Public Management from Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). Her fields of study and expertise are in Policing and related sciences. The dynamics of gender sensitivity have found particular prominence in her studies. She is a recipient of Emerging Researcher and Woman Researcher of the Year 2021. She has presented and peer-reviewed research papers at both national and international conferences. Dr. Khosa also serves on various institutional committees, including the highest governing body, the Senate. She was a member of the Traffic Law Enforcement Review Committee (TLERC), appointed by the Minister of Transport from 2016-2020. She is currently appointed a non-executive director by the Minister of Transport at Road Traffic Infringement Agency (RTIA) since August 2020 to date.