

Factors Impacting Women in Senior Leadership within the Public Sector in South Africa: A Public Sector Department Case



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ABSTRACT: This study sought to assess the factors impacting women in senior leadership within the public sector in South Africa, using a particular Department as a case study. The study used a qualitative approach, where data was gathered using semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The main finding was that women in leadership have limited access to networks and mentorship opportunities, and unequal pay and compensation. These challenges were found to have various implications for women leaders as well as for the organisation and society.

KEYWORDS: Social life balancing, government, leadership

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of women in leadership has continued to gain traction in the 21st century, with various academics, captains of industry, and women's representation groups advocating for women to be given the same opportunities as men (Roberts & Brown, 2019). According to Pullen and Vachhani (2021), patriarchy has dominated humankind, and this can be traced back even to the time of creation. Mashele and Alagidede (2022) state that men are superior to women and that women are supposed to help the men, not be at the forefront. Even the African traditional culture has always believed in male superiority, with women being relegated to the kitchen and child-rearing duties. The Islamic religion has also not been very supportive of gender equality, although some progress is now beginning to be seen in some countries (Seale et al., 2021).

Significant progress has been realised in various organisations and different sectors, including the political landscape, as the number of women in leadership positions is increasing. This shows that the world is improving in terms of their perception of women, considering that in some cultures women were not and are still not allowed even to attend school. As part of the gender equality initiatives, some countries, such as Zimbabwe, now reserve a certain number of seats in parliament for women, while employers are also reserving a certain number of top leadership positions for women (Chigudu, 2021). Cho et al. (2021) posit that globally, women hold 25.2% of parliamentary lower-house seats and 21.2% of ministerial positions. This shows that while there is progress, there is still a long way to go to achieve gender equality in top leadership positions.

Despite the significant progress made, women who have managed to occupy top leadership positions are reportedly encountering various challenges (Chigudu, 2021). These range from unfair treatment as compared to their male counterparts, work-life balancing challenges, being disrespected and undermined, as well as being sexually harassed, among others. These challenges have resulted in some women failing to reach their full potential, while others end up preferring lower-level positions that have less attention and responsibilities. This situation is working against efforts to empower women and ensure equal representation of women in all spheres of life. This problem prompted this study to assess the factors impacting women in senior leadership within the public sector in South Africa, using the Department of Social Development as a case study. The study therefore answered the following questions:

- What are the benefits of having women in senior leadership within the public sector in South Africa?
- What are the challenges faced by women in senior leadership within the public sector in South Africa?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Concept of Gender Equality: A South African Perspective

Gender equality is increasingly part of South Africa's socio-economic and political development. Therefore, there is a need to understand the determinants of gender equality and their role in South Africa's development. A 2018 report by the South African

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Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) found that South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries in the world. This is measured in terms of income and wealth (South African Human Rights Commission, 2018). In most cases, inequality overlaps with other phenomena, such as poverty, socioeconomic disadvantage, and race. Moorosi (2020) thus stipulates that women and other disadvantaged groups who do not conform to gender roles face various forms of discrimination when inequality manifests itself as unfair discrimination. This backdrop essentially accounts for the widening gap between men and women in South Africa.

Gender equality is increasingly becoming an important factor influencing the political, social, and economic conditions in South Africa. According to Kiamba (2019), gender equality is related to gender equality: the concept is explicit about gender equality, meaning that both women and men are free to develop their abilities, make choices, and access opportunities without being bound by stereotypes, strict gender roles, or prejudice. In the 1997 case of *President of the Republic of South Africa v. Hugo* (4), gender equality was defined in two forms: formal and substantive. Formal forms of gender equality arise from policies, instruments, and laws that provide for the equal treatment of all people. In most cases, gender equality in a formal sense is explicit in cases of direct discrimination based on sex and gender identity. Substantive equality, on the other hand, is a type of gender equality that aims to achieve equality by treating people and groups differently (Sojo et al., 2020). Affirmative action under Article 9(2) of the South African Constitution is part of substantive equality. Therefore, substantive equality is ideal in this study because it encourages governments to develop policies and mechanisms to create and promote equal opportunities in employment and education.

In 1996, Article 187 of the South African Constitution established the Gender Commission to promote and protect gender equality in South Africa's private and public sectors. The entire Constitution (Section 9) implies that men and women in society should be equal, and the workplace is part of that framework. This is clearly stated in Article 25, paragraph 5, which provides for equal access to land; Article 26, paragraph 2, which provides for gender equality in housing; and Article 27, paragraph 2, which provides for equal access to health care, food, water, and social assistance. Articles 29.1(b) and 29.2(a) provide for equity in education (South African Constitution, 1996).

There is also various legislation implementing the equal rights enshrined in the South African Constitution. For this study, the most useful legislation was the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act No. 4 of 2000 (PEPUDA) and the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998 (EEA). PEPUDA implements Article 9, Section 4 of the Constitution, which aims to address systemic discrimination and "eliminate social and economic inequalities." For example, Article 13 of PEPUDA states that discrimination based on sex is unfair, which can lead to unfair discrimination in labour, land, and education.

On the other hand, the Employment Equality Act (EEA) No. 55 of 1998, as amended in 2013, is comprehensive legislation related to gender equality in the workplace. The purpose of the Employment Equity Act is to achieve fairness in the workplace by:

- Promoting equal employment opportunity and fair treatment by eliminating unfair discrimination.
- Implementation of affirmative action measures to correct the employment disadvantages of specific groups.
- Ensuring equitable representation in the workforce across all occupational categories and levels.

From a South African perspective, the Act is crucial as it requires organisations to submit their Employment Fairness Reports so that the Ministry of Labour can see if they are EEA-related (Article 21 EEA).

According to Herbst and Roux (2023), in management, women make up only 20.7% in the private sector and 30.8% in the public sector. This is in stark contrast to men holding leadership positions in the public sector and decision-making offices, where men account for 68.5 percent in the private sector and 60.7 percent in the public sector. Kiamba (2019) notes that statistics on the increase in the number of women in leadership positions in the public sector between 2014 and 2016 show that women in top management positions, and women in general, still face challenges and a lack of opportunities to gain leadership positions in the public sector. Therefore, this can be explained because of systemic inequality and indirect gender-based discrimination.

2.2 The Benefits and Challenges of Having Women in Senior Leadership within the Public Sector in South Africa

Research has shown that several benefits can be enjoyed when women are occupying senior leadership positions in the workplace. In a study conducted by Ormajee (2018) comparing the impact of women as leaders on organisations compared to the impact of men, it was found that women as leaders have their advantages. Taking on such a high-profile job might be intimidating for women not presently in leadership positions because of the stigma it entails (Alli et al., 2021). This could discourage younger generations from attempting to remove obstacles. The proportion of women in top executive positions worldwide climbed to 29% in 2019. In 2020, this does not change, and in 2021, it increases to 31%, which is the highest value ever recorded (Mousa et al., 2021). Even though this is encouraging, women who are just starting their careers should be motivated by other women who are rising to positions of leadership. Once attained, it may provide all ambitious young female leaders with a direction to raise the worldwide proportion and set new benchmarks.

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Furthermore, female leaders were shown to be more transformational when male and female leaders were compared in a meta-analysis (Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala, 2022). Compared to the two-dimensional behavior (active and passive management) shown by male leaders, they demonstrated more unintentionally rewarding activities. It has been shown that this transformational leadership approach helps individuals develop a sense of social and personal identity while also establishing the organisation's purpose and objectives. This demonstrates a definite favorable influence on the achievement of the company and its personnel (Imburgia et al., 2021).

Women in leadership positions face various challenges, and these challenges are part of the reasons why there are fewer women in top leadership positions as compared to men. Women in top leadership roles struggle to strike a balance between their personal and professional lives (Alli et al., 2021). This is because these women must fulfil their roles as mothers, spouses, and other domestic duties. The answer to this problem has been suggested as flexible employment arrangements. Flexible work schedules allow people to better balance their personal and professional responsibilities by defining how, where, and when they work (Chyu et al., 2021). Flexible work schedules, formerly thought of as an employee perk or a convenience for carers (often women), are now recognised as a powerful tool for employers to recruit top talent and a cost-effective way to reduce absenteeism, attrition, and productivity (Johnson & Williams, 2020).

Even the most well-intentioned people have unconscious biases that manifest in everyday encounters and settings like the workplace, as shown by Seale et al. (2021). Black working women have difficulties that transcend racial/ethnicity, gender, and cultural boundaries (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022). Due to this, many black women often encounter the formidable obstacles presented by the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of others.

2.3 Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Framework

The Gender in Development (GID) Theory served as the study's guiding principle. This theory was popularised by Ester Boserup, and it proposes that women are untapped resources that can provide an economic contribution to global development (Roberts & Brown, 2019). This theory realises that for a long time, only men were involved in making major decisions that affected the whole globe, but the value that women can offer has remained untapped regardless of the huge potential. When this theory is implemented into policies, it aims to create equality by redefining traditional gender roles and gendered expectations. This theory fits perfectly in the current study, which seeks to assess the factors impacting women in senior leadership within the public sector in South Africa. This is because traditional gender roles and gendered expectations have been a huge stumbling block when it comes to women rising to prominent leadership positions.

However, there have been some critiques of this theory. For example, Sabarwal et al. (2023) argue that the GID theory fails to realise the relationship between genders and examines women's roles in isolation, separate from men. Furthermore, Govender et al. (2023) posit that this theory leaves out the fact that women are placed or forced into subordinate positions in society and are negatively affected by this position. Regardless of the critiques, this theory remains relevant to the study, as it aims to craft measures to help women attain and maintain leadership positions in the public sector.

According to the reviewed literature, factors impacting women in senior leadership positions can be categorised as individual factors (personal factors), organisational factors, and macro-environmental factors. These are illustrated in the conceptual framework below.

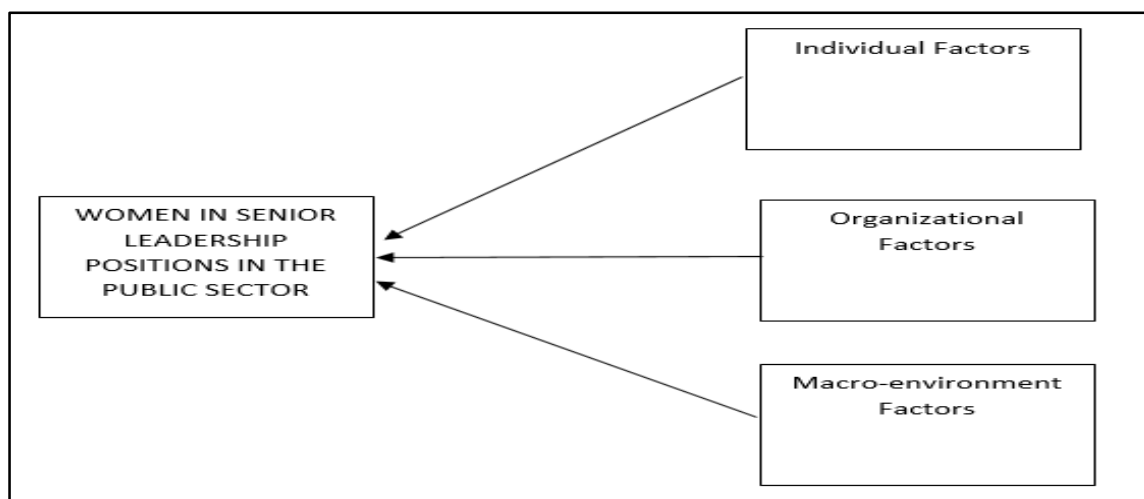


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Researcher's own conceptualisation

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3. METHODOLOGY

The study was geographically limited to the offices of the Department of Social Development in the Western Cape area. These offices were chosen because that is where some cases of women in senior leadership who are facing challenges were reported. The study took a qualitative approach, where data was gathered using semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. A sample of 12 participants was selected from the managers in the Department of Social Development using purposive sampling.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The Benefits of Having Women in Senior Leadership within the Public Sector in South Africa

The study established four main benefits of having women in senior leadership within the public sector in South Africa.

4.1.1 Diverse Perspectives

Women's diverse perspectives can help in generating innovative solutions, considering a broader set of perspectives, and addressing complex challenges more effectively. The following quotations support this claim.

Participant 1: "Having women in senior leadership positions brings diverse perspectives to the table. Women often approach problems and decision-making processes from different angles, considering a wider range of factors and potential impacts."

The inclusion of women in senior leadership positions within the public sector offers a wealth of diverse perspectives. Embracing and valuing these diverse perspectives is crucial for organisations seeking to address complex challenges and adapt to a rapidly changing environment.

4.1.2 Collaboration and Teamwork

Women's collaborative leadership style can enhance cooperation, communication, and teamwork within the organisation. It promotes a culture of inclusion and fosters a supportive work environment, leading to higher employee engagement and productivity.

Participant 2: "Women tend to have strong collaboration and teamwork skills. They foster an inclusive work environment, encourage active participation, and bring people together to work towards common goals."

Women leaders often possess exceptional collaboration and teamwork skills, which contribute to a positive work environment and cohesive teams. The result is improved problem-solving, increased innovation, and higher levels of employee engagement and satisfaction.

4.1.3 Empathy and Stakeholder Engagement

Women's empathetic approach to leadership enables them to understand the concerns and needs of employees, clients, and communities. This facilitates better stakeholder engagement, leading to improved relationships, customer satisfaction, and social impact.

Participant 5: "Women leaders often exhibit high levels of empathy and emotional intelligence. They understand the needs of stakeholders and engage with them effectively, building trust and rapport."

Women in senior leadership positions bring an asset to stakeholder engagement through their empathy and emotional intelligence. Through prioritising empathy and stakeholder engagement, women leaders contribute to stronger relationships, improved organisational reputation, and increased support from stakeholders.

4.1.4 Ethical and Sustainable Decision-Making

Women's emphasis on ethical and sustainable decision-making contributes to long-term organisational sustainability, responsible resource management, and the fulfilment of social and environmental obligations.

Participant 7: "Women in senior leadership positions tend to prioritise ethical considerations and sustainable practices. They are often more inclined to incorporate social and environmental responsibility into decision-making processes."

Women leaders in the public sector demonstrate a commitment to ethical and sustainable decision-making. They prioritise ethical considerations, such as fairness, transparency, and social responsibility, when making choices. Prioritising women's participation in senior leadership positions can lead to more ethical, responsible, and sustainable practices within the public sector in South Africa.

4.2 The Challenges Faced by Women in Senior Leadership within the Public Sector in South Africa

The findings show three main gendered challenges faced by women in leadership.

4.2.1 Gender Bias and Stereotypes

The participants noted gender bias and stereotypes as a gendered challenge faced by women in leadership.

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Participant 4: "Yes, women in senior leadership positions do encounter challenges not encountered by their male counterparts. Gender bias and stereotypes often hinder their advancement, and they have to work harder to prove their capabilities and competence."

4.2.2 Limited Access to Networks and Mentorship Opportunities

The participants also noted limited access to networks and mentorship opportunities as a gendered challenge faced by women in leadership.

Participant 7: "Women in senior leadership positions often face limited access to networks and mentorship opportunities. This lack of support and guidance can impede their professional growth and hinder their ability to navigate organisational dynamics."

4.2.3 Unequal Pay and Compensation

Furthermore, the participants highlighted unequal pay and compensation as a gendered challenge faced by women in leadership.

Participant 1: "Gender-based pay disparities persist in senior leadership roles. Women often face unequal pay and compensation compared to their male colleagues, which not only affects their financial well-being but also perpetuates gender inequalities within the public sector."

Women in senior leadership positions in the public sector encounter gendered challenges that hinder their progress. Gender bias and stereotypes create additional barriers for women, forcing them to prove their capabilities and competence more than their male counterparts. Unequal pay and compensation further exacerbate gender inequalities and undermine women's financial well-being and job satisfaction within the public sector.

5. DISCUSSION

Women in senior leadership positions in the public sector bring diverse perspectives, fostering innovative decision-making and problem-solving. Khwela et al. (2020) assert that their exceptional collaboration and teamwork skills contribute to a positive work environment, fostering inclusivity and a sense of collective ownership. Women leaders also demonstrate empathy and emotional intelligence, understanding the needs and perspectives of various stakeholders. Their active listening and empathetic approach build trust and rapport, promote inclusive decision-making, and align with stakeholder interests.

Ethical and sustainable decision-making is a priority for women leaders in the public sector. They prioritise fairness, transparency, and social responsibility, ensuring long-term consequences and sustainability. According to Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala (2022), women's strong integrity and willingness to challenge traditional norms contribute to a more inclusive and responsible decision-making process. By prioritising women's participation in senior leadership positions, organisations can enhance their reputation, build trust with stakeholders, and contribute to the overall well-being of society.

The challenges faced by women in senior leadership positions within the public sector have a profound impact on their professional and personal lives. Such impacts include a lack of confidence, reduced career progression opportunities, work-life balance support, discriminatory practices, and unconscious bias. These findings concur with Mbugua (2019), who notes that the accumulation of gendered challenges can lead to a lack of confidence, hamper career progression opportunities, and create a sense of isolation. Meng and Neill (2021) also agree with the findings, citing that the absence of adequate work-life balance support adds to the strain women face, leading to stress and burnout. Discriminatory practices, including unconscious bias, further impede women's progress and undermine their credibility, affecting their ability to contribute fully to decision-making processes. The challenges faced by women in senior leadership positions have broader implications for organisations and society. These implications include the loss of diverse perspectives, stifled innovation and creativity, as well as the perpetuation of gender inequalities. Mandapati (2021) asserts that a lack of representation results in a loss of diverse perspectives, stifling innovation, and creativity. This diminishes the organisation's ability to address complex problems effectively.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that the benefits of having women in senior leadership within the public sector in South Africa include having diverse perspectives, collaboration and teamwork, empathy, and stakeholder engagement, as well as ethical and sustainable decision-making. The study also concludes that there are three main gendered challenges facing women in leadership: limited access to networks and mentorship opportunities; unequal pay and compensation; and gender bias and stereotypes. These challenges have various implications for women leaders as well as for organisations and society.

The study recommends conducting a gender pay gap analysis, developing equitable compensation policies, establishing leadership development programmes for women in the public sector, strengthening supportive organisational policies and practices, and

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enhancing gender diversity in recruitment and promotion processes. Future studies are recommended to conduct the same study in a different government department and use a larger sample so that the results can be compared.

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