

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Closing the Gap: Assessing the State of Women's Advancement in South African Organisations

Karl Hofmeyr<sup>1\*</sup> and Cindy Mzobe<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, 26 Melville Road Illovo Johannesburg, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup>Commercial Business Manager at PetroSA, Frans Conradie Drive, Parow, 7500, South Africa.

Accepted 22 April, 2025

This article explores factors that influence the advancement of women organisations in South Africa. Based on the sample of women working in different industries, this article investigates the barriers which they have to overcome to break into the executive ranks. Issues such as the dual roles played by women, the perception amongst some that men are “born leaders” and gender discrimination are investigated. The extent to which certain enabling factors are in place in organisations which support women advancement is assessed. The psychological effects that women experience as a result of stereotypes and barriers are also studied. The article proposes solutions to the challenge of the advancement of women and indicates on the basis of the research whether real progress is being made in South African organisations. It concludes with practical steps for leaders in organisations.

**Key words:** Affirmative action, employment equity, women in leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

The advancement of women into more senior levels in both the public and private sectors in South Africa remains one of the great challenges facing organisations (Bezuidenhout et al., 2008; Booysen, 2008; Zanoni et al., 2010). The relative absence of women in senior leadership positions, and particularly on boards of companies, means that women remain underutilised. This results in frustration on the part of women and impacts negatively on corporate performance. There is no doubt that there is a wealth of untapped talent in the country which is not achieving its rightful place alongside men in the hierarchy of organisations. This article sets out to investigate the reasons for the slow advancement of women, the stereotypes and barriers which exist, and possible solutions to the problem.

It is well-documented that progress in the broad area of employment equity has been limited since the first employment equity (EE) legislation was promulgated in 1996 (Booyesen and Nkomo, 2006; Horwitz et al., 2005; Thomas, 2004). The 2009 annual census undertaken by the Business Women's Association of South Africa reported that women in senior positions still lag far behind men in terms of their representation in executive management positions. Internationally, a report produced in 2009 revealed that, four in ten companies worldwide, there are no women in senior management. Women average is only 4% of the presidents and 10% of the executive levels in the largest companies in the European Union (Early and Sczesny, 2009).

Mathur-Helm (2005) puts the case bluntly when she says that “...women are still under-utilized in the South Africa employment market and are a wasted resource”. She goes on to suggest that a patriarchy still exists in local organisations which prevents women from achieving top management and professional roles in companies. This implies that firms have not evolved enough to share managerial and leadership responsibility with women.

In another report on women in management, Hayward (2005) highlights the point that “the world's boardrooms

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [hofmeyrk@gibs.co.za](mailto:hofmeyrk@gibs.co.za). Tel: 0117714125.

**Abbreviations:** EE, Employment equity; BBBEE, Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment; BEE, Black Economic Empowerment; PC, personal computer; HIV, human immunodeficiency virus; HR, human resources.

are sadly lacking in women and much has been written over the years about the “sexiest glass ceiling” that hampers women’s success beyond a certain point in their career. While for men, the glass ceiling may be just a myth, for many women it is a source of real frustration and can potentially spell the end of their career unless they can find the way to break through”.

The situation of black women in South Africa is particularly acute since they were doubly disadvantaged as a result of political discrimination which they were subjected to under apartheid (Selby and Sutherland, 2006). This was evidenced by limited education opportunities, lack of equal opportunities and racial discrimination.

Albertyn’s (1994) article on women’s transition to democracy in South Africa highlights the racial differences in the struggle. She notes that “white middle- class women’s struggles is generally concerned with the issues of political equality and their legal status, while the political struggles of black women (and the few white women in the liberation struggle) have involved claims for political and economic equality within the transformation of the state”.

Internationally, the issue of women in management has also attracted a significant amount of attention. Within the gender literature, scholars have investigated the social mechanisms marginalising women in the workplace (Alam et al., 2009). These studies have shown how gendered roles, relative numbers, network structures and gender-specific reward systems have kept women in subordinate professional positions (Zanoni et al., 2010).

An area which has entered the debate about employment equity is whether white women should be included as beneficiaries of the EE legislation (Booyesen, 2008). An argument has been put forward that white women were not discriminated against to the same extent as black women during apartheid, and with equity legislation having been in place for more than ten years it is now time to take white women out of the legislation to concentrate on black women.

Booyesen and others argue strongly that this would be wrong as the reasons for removing white women are flawed, and removing them would slow down the all-important goal of advancing women in general. Furthermore, this might split the efforts of women to take up their rightful place in the workplace: “The last thing we need is to polarise white women from black women. If more white women are being appointed to senior positions, let us work with them to grow the pipeline of black women” (Booyesen, 2008). The main focus of this article is on the perceptions and experiences of black women, though many of the findings relate to white women as well.

South African women face many of the problems which their counterparts experience in other parts of the world. The South Africa situation is made more complicated as a result of the legacy left by our apartheid history.

## **Research aim**

The aim of the research was to identify the problems and barriers faced by women as they advance in organisations and how this affects them. The study also proposes solutions to the problems and assesses whether progress is being made.

Given that the area is well researched, the particular contribution of this study is to take stock of the current situation regarding women in management, propose solutions, and to decide if there is any reason to be optimistic that organisations are changing their attitude and strategies towards advancing women.

The approach taken in the research was to gain more insight into how female advancement is made sense of and experienced by women themselves, rather than by top managers and policy makers. According to Zanoni et al. (2010) “... too few empirical studies have taken the perspective and reported the experience of individuals belonging to historically disadvantaged groups themselves as well as their “majority” colleagues”.

It was hoped that the research would help organisations to become more aware of the challenges women experience in their careers. It would also reinforce the fact that diversity and advancement of women represents an opportunity which organisations cannot afford to ignore. The authors believe that bringing more women into the corporate world, particularly in management roles, will enable organisations to leverage the softer skills that women possess. This in turn helps them with employee as well as customer retention. Women should use their qualities of a deeper humanity, care and selflessness to enhance corporate performance and growth. Given the diversity in the customer base of most organisations, it is appropriate that the company profile should reflect this for practical reasons, and also because women are more likely to connect with their counterparts in the customer base (Schein, 2007).

Some of the aspects investigated in this study are: societal perceptions of men as default leaders; the dual role that women play at work and at home; discrimination in the workplace; lack of career orientation; insufficient leadership development programmes for women; lack of self confidence and assertiveness as a result of gender stereotyping; lack of mentorship and coaching; and the absence of enough role models for women.

## **Women in management**

Social role theory and expectations theory attempt to explain that the inequalities between men and women arise from a perception that men are generally more competent than women, particularly in an organisational context (Nkomo and Ngambi, 2009). These theories suggest that, a perception has been created that leadership tasks require characteristics that are masculine and

this leads to a notion that men make better leaders than women. If women become leaders, then the perception is that, their behaviour changes to resemble that of men, because of the masculine characteristics that go with leadership (Coleman, 2008; Nkomo and Ngambi, 2009).

Silvestri (2003) notes that “gender theorists argue that organisations have built into their core foundations the gender biases that exist in society. Gender is a social not a biological construct. It assigns roles to men and women according to historical, cultural and social beliefs and values. Because masculine values predominate in society, they also prevail in organisations to the detriment of feminine values and gender equality”. Stereotypes about gender tend to be deeply embedded in society and they follow women and men into the workplace as it is the same men and women which comes from the same societies that hold these beliefs. The environment created in organisations as a result of these perceptions affects many women who experience feelings of self-doubt and lack of assertiveness.

This behaviour leads to the second problem area of the emotional and psychological effects on women. These include behaviours such as women either becoming agreeable to whatever men propose as decisions, or losing confidence and beginning to doubt their abilities, or becoming disillusioned with the workplace. As a result, they either give up trying, or become tougher. Whichever way they react to their male counterparts, it reaffirms the belief that women cannot make it in a “man’s world”. Put simply, if a woman is seen to be able to take decisive action, reprimand when necessary, challenge the norms where appropriate, that women is likely to attract criticism from men and might be deemed to be tough and unapproachable. A man with the same attributes will be called structured, a visionary, a strategist and a great leader (Hayward, 2005).

Despite the disadvantages and stereotypes, women have made some progress in organisations but at more senior levels they have encountered what is popularly known as the “glass ceiling”. Eagli and Carli (2007) argue further that there is an added dimension which they term “the labyrinth”. This is defined as circuitous paths to success that exist, which women have difficulty finding their way through. The appropriate paths are difficult to discover and require “considerable skill and a fair amount of luck”.

Gender stereotypes tend to portray women as emotional, intuitive and socially oriented while men are viewed as dominant, rational and task-oriented (Willemsen, 2002). These stereotypes make it hard for women to break through the glass ceiling. One study describes the “double-bind dilemma for women in leadership – damned if you do, doomed if you don’t” (Catalyst, 2007). The role that women have traditionally played as mothers and child bearers has resulted in a perception that women are less capable in the work environment, particularly in leadership roles. Women are

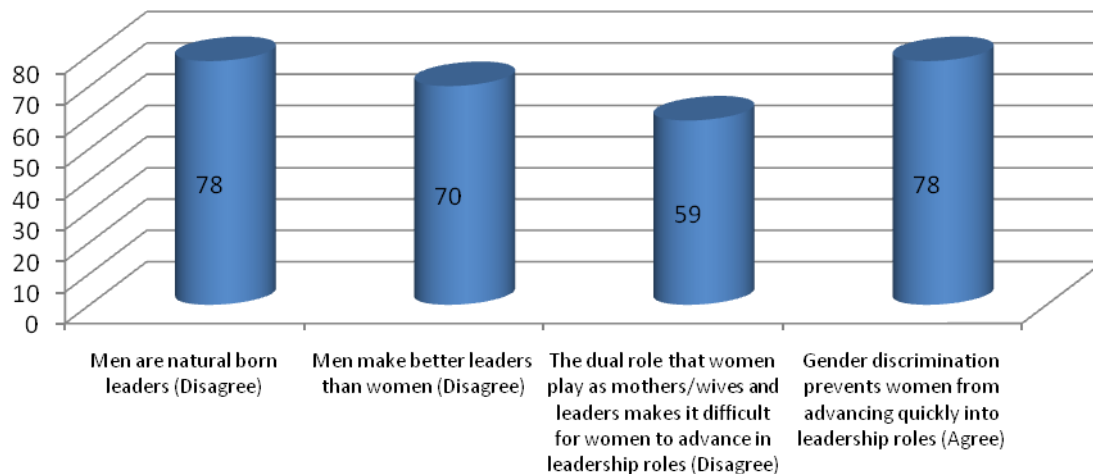
viewed more as homemakers as opposed to corporate leaders.

These stereotypes follow some men into the workplace and they use them as reasons why women should not be equal counterparts in business. These men do not actively engage in programmes of leadership development for women, nor do they promote mentoring and coaching, and they may not accept decisions taken by women who do make it into the boardroom.

If there is a perception that men make better leaders than women it would be worth looking at definitions of leadership to see if the assumption holds water. Kouzes and Posner (1995) define leadership as “the art of mobilising others to want to struggle for shared aspirations”. The Oxford Dictionary (2004) broadly defines leading as “cause to go with one”, “influence”, “position of advantage”. These definitions point to an ability to persuade people to work towards shared goals. They make no reference to the leader needing male attributes of masculinity and physical strength, and therefore the stereotypes used to discourage women from taking up leadership roles need to be challenged. There is no reason why men innately should be more able than women in leadership roles. On the contrary, there may be an argument that women may have a predisposition towards the skills of motivation and engagement, and qualities such as emotional intelligence which are critical competences for leaders (Nkomo, 2011).

To start to deal with the problems of negative perceptions and discrimination in the workplace, the government drafted the EE Act in 1998. The aim of the act was “to redress fundamental labour market inequities and to minimise discrimination on the basis of demographic profile (race, gender) as well as disability and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) status” (Bezuidenhout et al., 2008). The act was formulated on the basis that inequity in the labour market was the result of past statutory discrimination in the workplace as well as the “interventions by the colonial and apartheid regimes in other policy realms” (Bezuidenhout et al., 2008). The roots of the employment equity legislation can be traced back from the African National Congress (ANC) Freedom Charter. The Charter made reference to an abhorrence of any kind of discrimination, including gender wage gaps. Under the clause “There shall be work and security”, it is stated that “men and women of all races shall receive equal pay for equal work” (Freedom Charter, 1955). The Charter also condemned race and colour discrimination as a punishable crime.

The particular case of black women has been in the spotlight more recently. Black women, in theory, should be advantaged both by EE legislation as well as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) which followed, thus giving them an advantage over white women. According to Booysen (2009), black women’s authority is still negatively influenced due to the male



**Figure 1.** Reaction to stereotypes about women in organisations.

management stereotype and the dominance of white men in leadership positions, even though they are viewed as being in the most advantageous position. “Black women are thus see-sawing between being doubly jeopardised (previously low status and present low status in the management system) and doubly advantaged (recent high status) in the supra system, due to political changes EE and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) legislation (Booyesen, 2009). The main reasons for the limited success of legislation, according to Booyesen, include low commitment to EE from top management, a lack of cultural awareness programmes, a transformation-resistant organisational culture with a white-dominated character, and the assertion that there is inadequate monitoring and controlling of the implementation of EE legislation. These factors, and their consequences, will be referred to in the article, particularly in the areas on solutions.

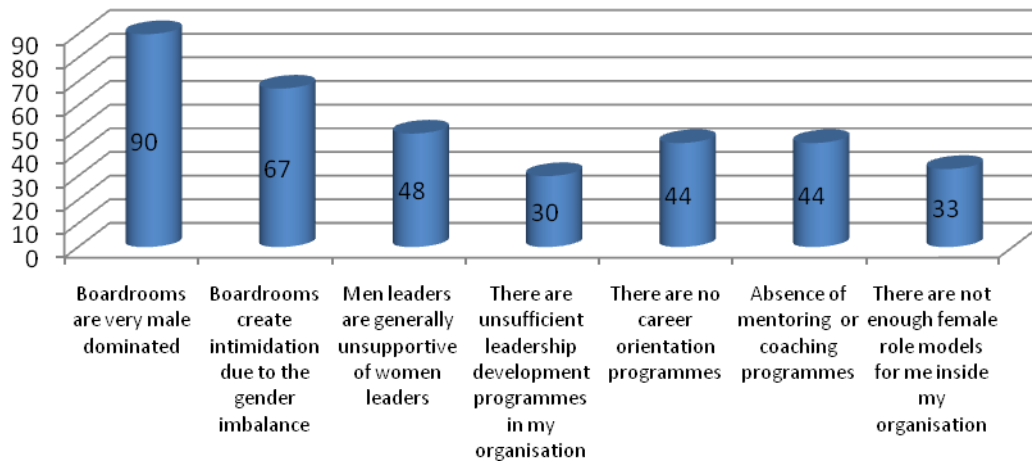
Organisational structures and systems contribute to the problem of women advancement, as they still favour men more than women as they ignore the woman’s dual role. Drew and Murtagh (2004) argue that women are expected to work longer hours in order to meet their performance target, in the same way that men are under pressure to sacrifice time at home. However, in general, it is easier for men as they often have a support structure that includes having a wife at home. If women choose not to pursue targets that will require them to spend more time at work than home, they risk missing out on promotions or participation in important projects. The increased hours that women have to spend to meet work demands, results in a “time squeeze” that leaves little energy for women to partake in leisurely or entertainment activities (Lewis, 2003). It is little surprise that these challenges lead women to develop psychological behaviours such as lack of confidence, lack of esteem, self doubt, or the opposite of these which are perceived

as aggressiveness, toughness, and the constant challenging of the status quo.

Before considering the research questions, the point needs to be made that not all women (or all men) necessarily strive to be work-centred. Hakim (2006) defines three different types of women, the adaptive women, the work-centred women, and home-centred women. Adaptive women opt to combine work and home requirements and will try to find a balance through choosing roles that will allow them to achieve both. On the other hand, the work-centred women are only committed to work requirements and are not really interested in other demands such as marriage or children. They focus on their jobs in the same way that men do and would even sacrifice some of the home demands such as having children. The home-centred women are housewives who prefer to look after family life and are not worried about being part of the employment world. Thus there are different types of women and one should not generalise: some women are happy to stay at home and some are work-centred and will thrive for career advancement in the same way that men do. This is described as exploratory as it did not set out to explicitly measure the enabling conditions and the factors limiting the advancement of women.

The three questions for this study were influenced by the main problems facing women in leadership. Firstly, the societal beliefs exist where women are seen as care-givers and homemakers rather than leaders in a corporate setting. These societal stereotypes follow some men into the workplace and they use them as reasons why women should not be regarded as equals in the areas of leadership and decision making (Alam et al., 2010).

This behaviour then leads to the second problem area which is the emotional and psychological effects on women. The psychological effects include behaviours



**Figure 2.** Barriers to the advancement of women.

such as those where women either become agreeable to whatever men propose as decisions, or lose confidence and begin to doubt their own decisions. They often become disillusioned with the workplace and either give up trying to break through, or become tougher (Human, 1996; Nkomo, 2011; Thomas, 2004). Whichever way they react, to their male counterparts it reaffirms their belief that women cannot make it in a man's world.

Having investigated the barriers and their psychological effects, the research turned to the possible solutions to the problem of the absence of women in leadership. The questions framing the research were:

1. What are the perceived stereotypes and barriers to women reaching leadership positions in corporate South Africa?
2. What are the perceived psychological effects of the stereotypes on women's confidence and abilities?
3. What solutions are there to the problem of a lack of women in leadership positions?

The answers to these questions would enable the researchers to assess, qualitatively, whether there has been progress in the advancement of women in organisations.

## METHODOLOGY

The research was descriptive in nature and it used diagnostic analysis to address the questions posed as suggested by Alam (2011) descriptive research attempts to determine the extent of differences in the needs, perceptions, attitudes and characteristics of subgroups. A diagnostic analysis is "the analysis used to clarify research findings, such as explanations respondents give for a behaviour or attitude" (Zikmund, 2003). The value of descriptive studies is that they set out to explore and give reasons why groups and subgroups feel a certain way. However, the limitation is that such studies do not provide evidence of the causal nature of the findings.

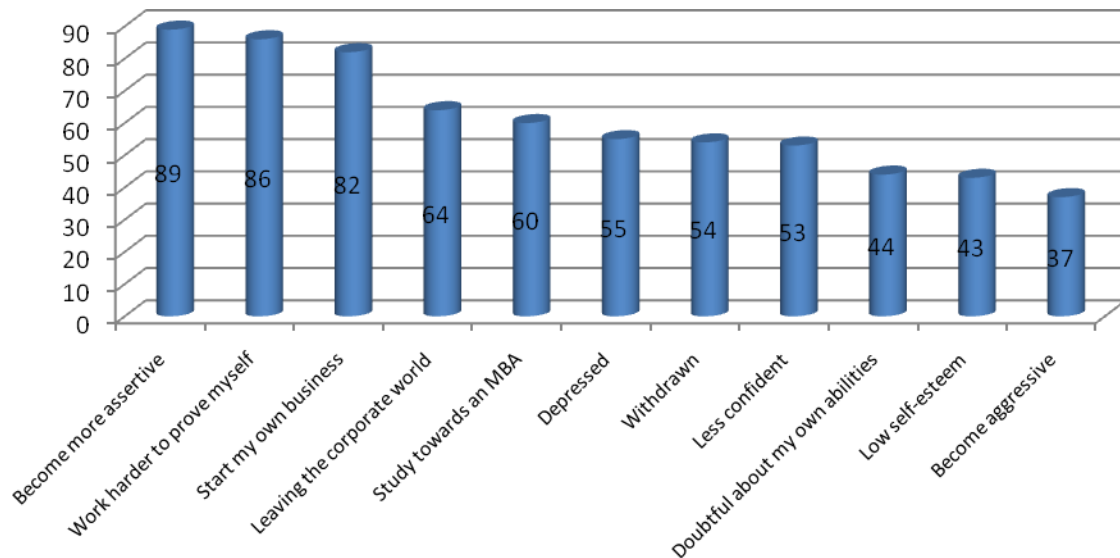
The research method used was a self-administered questionnaire, completed online. Responses were confidential as no names were recorded. This allowed respondents to give candid answers without any interference from the researchers. The internet survey method was selected because this approach "provides quick, efficient, and accurate means of assessing information about the population" (Zikmund, 2003).

The unit of analysis was women across a broad cross-section of South African industries. The women were junior to senior managers, as well as aspiring managers, in the age group of 30 to 60, with a minimum of one year's experience in a management position. Coding questions asked respondents to indicate their race, age, educational level, and work experience.

Pre-testing of the questionnaire allowed the researchers to identify user problems and ambiguity of questions. The non-probability method of "snowballing" was used to derive the sample. This was preferred to either convenience, judgement, or quota sampling (Zikmund, 2003). Questionnaires were sent to women who fitted the criteria for the study and this primary sample was asked to refer the survey to other women managers. In this way, a sample of 117 managers was collected. The managers represented a cross-section of women of all population groups, although the majority (79.5%) was black women. They all met the criteria of level in the organizations and age. Almost half of the respondents were in the age group of 31 to 35 (46.2%). 19% of the sample had a graduate or post-graduate qualification, and 88% had a least 6 years working experience. 59% were in middle management or higher levels in their organizations.

The internet survey method enabled the researchers to remain neutral in the data gathering stage as there was not direct interaction with respondents except through the covering letter explaining the reasons for the request to participate in the study. This was an advantage as the respondents were able to give honest answers without fear or influence of the researchers. Confidentiality and anonymity was provided to the respondents as no names were recorded. A limitation of researcher absence is the possibility of misinterpretation or questions or statements, but this was mitigated by providing contact details for the researchers. Four respondents contacted the researchers for guidance about completing the survey.

The limitations of the research are, firstly, that it looked at women as the population of relevance. It excluded the male perspective which would need to be sought in a wider study of the topic. Secondly the study did not distinguish between different industries,



**Figure 3.** Responses to the perceived barriers to advancement.

or between the public and private sectors and it would be misleading to generalise the results as being equally reflective of different industries or both public and private sectors. Furthermore, the research was not race based as it took into account all women (Black, Indian, Coloured, and White) as equal participants. While the majority of respondents (79.5%) were Black, the results may have been diffused by the responses of the other population groups who are differentially impacted by, for example, Black Economic Empowerment and Employment Equity legislation. It can be assumed that the effects of past discrimination are not felt equally across the different race groups.

## FINDINGS

### Research question 1: What are the perceived stereotypes and barriers to women reaching leadership positions in corporate South Africa?

Respondents were given a number of perceived stereotypes and barriers to the advancement of women to leadership positions in business, and asked for their opinions. They were also given the opportunity to add other perceived barriers.

One of the most frequently used stereotypes is that men are “natural born leaders” when compared with women. Not surprisingly, 78% of the sample disagreed with this statement (9% were unsure and the balance agreed). In response to the statement “Men make better leaders than women”, 70% of women disagreed. These responses by women are an assertion that they must be accepted as equal partners with men.

The findings reinforce the literature on the subject and highlight the impact of stereotypes and barriers on the advancement of women in business. The Catalyst (2007) report refers to a notion that men are the “default” leaders, or “natural born leaders”. When women leaders

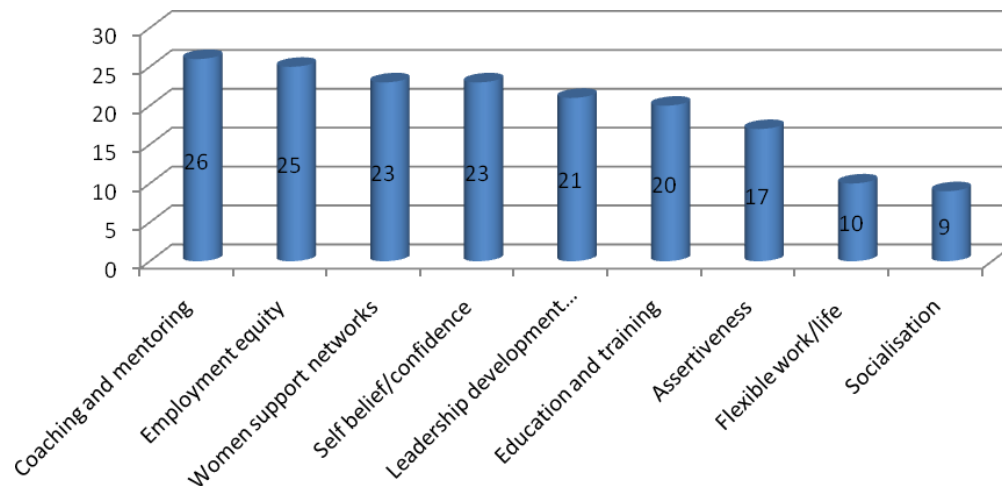
emerge and portray similar behaviours to male leaders, such as assertiveness and decisiveness, they get labelled as being aggressive and trying to be like men, but the fact is that a “wage gap” exists between the two genders. Broadridge and Hearn (2008) agree that a wage gap exists and that it is one of the biggest gender equality issues. One of the respondents in the research commented that this predicament leads to “Women giving up due to having to prove themselves continuously as opposed to men who just get accepted”.

A further barrier to advancement for women is the perception that the dual role of women as mothers/wives on one hand and business leaders on the other holds women back. 59% of the respondents did not see this as a problem, though a significant proportion (38%) did regard it as a problem. However, 78% agreed with the statement that “gender discrimination prevents women from advancing quickly into leadership roles”. Only 16% felt that gender discrimination is not a barrier to their progress.

The research also made provision for comments from the respondents. Some of the comments were “There’s a perception by men that women are supposed to be at home and men should be the breadwinners”; “There are stereotypes that insist that men are better leaders than women”; “Stereotyping by society that women are not leaders”; “Men think they are far superior to women”; “There’s still a perception that a woman’s place is at home”. Another comment made reference to an unintended consequence of employment equity: “There is a perception that women are there because of affirmative action and one should not expect much of a contribution from them”.

The dilemma is that women are faced with three predicaments, one of being too soft, or too tough, but





**Figure 4.** Proposed solutions.

never just right. If women act in ways that are consistent with the gender stereotypes, they are viewed as less competent leaders. When they act inconsistently with the stereotypes, they are viewed as unfeminine (Catalyst, 2007).

Another finding from the research was that women did not view the dual role of being the mother/wife and a leader as a serious barrier. Women seem to have accepted that responsibility as part of their lives and they have devised ways of working around it and therefore it is not a significant issue for them. 59% of women surveyed felt that the dual role does not prevent them from advancing more quickly in their careers. Women did suggest as a solution, that organizations could make it easier for them by providing flexible work-life opportunities where they would be able to thrive in both home and work. Eagli and Carli (2007) support these observations, suggesting that if organizations could provide “family-friendly” policies such as flexi-time, and childcare facilities, women would thrive more and increase their performance, and guilt would be minimized.

It became clear from the findings that not only male colleagues are unsupportive of women advancement, but husbands too. One woman commented that “Husbands feel intimidated by a woman's career growth and do not support you 100%”. The research suggests that flexible home/work balance is not only the organisation's responsibility, but husbands must also play a role in supporting women. It must not be expected that home responsibilities are only for women. Men must share responsibility for looking after children and doing house chores.

Not surprisingly, most respondents (90%) felt that boardrooms are very male dominated and two-thirds reported that boardrooms create intimidation due to this gender imbalance. When asked whether men in

leadership roles are supportive, almost half (48%) felt that they were not.

The research also asked questions about the provision of certain enabling factors for the advancement of women in organisations. The results suggest that not enough of the support mechanisms exist for women in business. 30% of the women surveyed indicated that there were insufficient leadership development programmes in their organisations, and 44% reported that there were no career orientation programmes. Furthermore, there were inadequate mentoring/coaching programmes, and an absence of female role models for them in their organisation.

Also asked in the study to cite five possible stereotypes and barriers they had experienced during their careers, many of which reinforced the questions posed in the survey. A number of themes emerged, and in rank order they were: a lack of confidence, self-esteem, and intimidation; the existence of an “old boys club”; the observation that there are times when women “pull each other down”; gender discrimination; a lack of mentors and role models; the dual role of women; the existence of cultural/social factors; a lack of leadership development programmes; societal factors; and lack of education.

One of the issues referred to by respondents may be called the “pull her down syndrome”. This refers to women bringing each other down and not supporting each other's advancement. A significant number of women cited this as one of the barriers to their advancement. They felt that other women were partly responsible for the slow advancement of women; that they did not support each other. When asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement that “Women are generally unsupportive of other women”, 64% of women agreed.

Furthermore, the question about what they thought were the barriers to women advancement resulted in

comments such as “Women not wanting to mentor each other”; “Women themselves”; “Women undermining their female managers”; “Women tend to be their own enemies in work environments and are never (at times) supportive of each other, and rather stifle each other's progress”; and “Some women have difficulty accepting others in professional/leadership roles”. The implication of this finding is that there is a need for women to be more supportive of each other as they move up the organisation.

The respondents' perceptions of perceived stereotypes were compared across the demographics of age, education, work experience, and management level. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) comparisons between demographic groups revealed two significant differences. Firstly, the only significant difference found at the 5% level or lower was between different education levels on the item “Gender discrimination prevents women from advancing quickly into leadership positions” ( $F = 4.339$ ;  $df = 3,98$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), where graduates had a higher mean (4.450) than matriculants (3.44). The only significant difference at the 5% level encountered between respondents at different management levels was on the item “Men leaders are generally unsupportive of women leaders” ( $F = 2.731$ ;  $df = 3,87$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). However no two groups differed on the Scheffe post-hoc comparison; rather all the small group differences contributed to this result. Comparisons across the other variables considered, namely age and work experience, were not significant.

Responses to the first research question dealing with stereotypes and barriers indicate that there remain many serious and intractable problems. These range from ingrained stereotypes about men making better leaders than women, to simple discrimination at work. The dual home/work role which women have to play and the male-dominated culture in organisations particularly in the boardroom also emerged as key issues. Many specific barriers were also identified such as a lack of mentoring and role models, insufficient leadership development programmes, and women not supporting each other sufficiently.

The impression which is gained is of a playing field which is heavily tipped in favour of men, and an organisational environment which does not support naturally the progress of women. From the comments made by the women in the study, the idea is conveyed that women often find themselves “on the outside looking in” and excluded from the core of the organisation where the real decisions are taken and which is dominated by men.

## **Research question 2: What are the psychological effects of the perceived barriers on women's confidence and abilities?**

Having looked at the problems experienced by women, respondents were asked to indicate what emotional or

psychological effects the barriers have had on them in their ambitions to advance in their companies. They reported that they sometimes become more assertive (89%) and even aggressive (37%). The barriers also encourage them to work harder to prove themselves (86%). On the other hand, some negative responses were feelings of depression (55%), a lack of confidence (53%), low self-esteem (43%), and feeling doubtful of their own abilities (44%). These are significant concerns as they work against the very qualities needed to succeed in a male dominated environment, namely attributes such as self-confidence and a positive self image.

Based on one-way ANOVA, there were only a few differences when results were compared by the demographics of age, education, work experience, and management level. A significant difference at the 5% level or lower was found on the item “I sometimes feel low self-esteem” ( $F = 3.921$ ;  $df = 4,93$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) when junior managers were compared with middle managers, with junior managers reporting significantly higher levels of this concern.

The only other significant difference encountered with the age group demographic was on the item: “I sometimes become more assertive” ( $F = 3.96$ ;  $df = 3,92$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Respondents below the age of 30 and between 31 to 35 scored significantly higher than 36 to 40 year olds on this item (means = 4.61, 4.52 and 3.8 for the below 30, 31 to 35 and 36 to 40 age groups respectively). The data show that there are significant psychological effects and emotions that women experience due to the challenges they face in the workplace. Among them are the following:

**Poor self-image:** 53% of the women surveyed agreed that being subjected to gender discrimination, lack of support, lack of mentors and leadership development programmes leads to loss of confidence. 44% indicated that they become doubtful of their own abilities, while 43% reported that their self esteem suffers. Referring to the case of Black women, Dhlomo (2008) reports that “Black women do experience many of the same possible challenges as other races; these include a lack of self esteem, support, qualifications or experience and juggling many roles from mother to career woman”. She further states that, women also face the limitations placed on them by gender stereotyping and outright discrimination which can cause women to try too hard to prove themselves or to simply withdraw for fear of rejection. The data from this study supports this view as 86% of respondents said that they dealt with the stereotype effects by “working harder to prove themselves”. When asked to comment on what psychological effects they have experienced, respondents reported feelings of low self esteem, lack of energy, lack of self-esteem, lack of self worth, lack of drive, and even fear.

**Lack of assertiveness:** Respondents expressed a view that the lack of assertiveness could also be attributed to



the intimidating nature of South African boardrooms which are male dominated. As noted earlier, 67% indicated that the boardroom gender imbalance creates intimidation.

Burmeister (2009) has reported that "South African Boards are still very much male dominated". In her research, she found that the average male director has been in that role for over 15 years and is 67 years of age on average.

Lack of assertiveness can result in a negative self-perception. Mathur-Helm (2005) goes as far as to suggest that some women may take pride in accepting secondary roles and by following male norms, either because they accept this as a way to survive or because they fear challenging the status quo.

**Feeling depressed or withdrawn:** Over half of the women surveyed reported that the stereotypes and barriers make them feel depressed (55%) or withdrawn (54%).

**Aggressive and coercive:** 37% of women admitted that they sometimes become aggressive. One woman observed that women need to "speak up, unfortunately who ever screams the loudest is listened to". Another respondent commented that women do need to "stick their necks out". One in three women felt that they sometimes become coercive in response to their frustrations.

**Wanting to leave the corporate world:** A disturbing finding was that almost two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they sometimes feel like leaving the corporate world. An implication of this would be the loss of the potential and diversity that women bring into organizations. More than half of the women surveyed indicated that they would seriously consider leaving their company to study towards an MBA, or sometimes felt like resigning to start their own business. Another option for women is to leave the corporate world to become a housewife. However, only one in four admitted to sometimes considering this avenue.

The reactions to advancement barriers are separated into two categories. On one hand, there is a pro-active response indicating that some women will work harder to improve themselves or they will become more assertive. These responses attracted the highest scores (89 and 86% respectively) suggesting that this is the more likely reaction.

On the other hand, more than half of the respondents reported that they sometimes feel withdrawn, less confident, or depressed as they experience the barriers they experience in organisations. These relatively high scores are a cause for concern as they imply reactions which will be counter-productive in an environment where women have to prove themselves.

### **Research question 3: What are the possible solutions to the leadership advancement challenges faced by women?**

As the research turned to solutions, the point of departure was that diversity should be conceptualised as a set of rare, valuable and difficult to imitate resources (Richard, 2000). "Companies properly managing diversity would attract and retain skilled workers in an increasingly diverse labour market, better service increasingly diverse markets by matching diverse customers with a more diverse workforce, improve organisational learning and creativity through employees' exposure to a wider range of perspectives, and increase organisational flexibility in increasingly turbulent contexts" (Zanoni, 2010).

Having looked at different stereotypes and barriers that women are faced with in their careers, it was important to propose solutions to offer employers and women themselves to deal with the gender imbalances in companies. The solutions would also assist women to take up their rightful places in the corporate hierarchy. The solutions proposed were derived from the respondents themselves. They were very passionate about this subject and the recommendations were detailed, ranging from issues of self-confidence to systemic changes that both the organisations and the government would need to implement to address the problem.

Respondents made a total of 217 suggestions. These were analysed and grouped qualitatively to identify the main themes. A total of nine themes were identified. This was conducted to assess the significance differences in the answers provided by women according to the demographics of age, level of education, management level and experience. Although most responses showed insignificant level of response differences, there were a few exceptions. Significant differences in responses were identified on the following proposed solutions: leadership development programmes (difference identified according to educational level), employment equity (education and experience), flexible work/life (age and experience), coaching and mentorship (education), women support networks (management level), and socialisation (education and management level).

**Assertiveness:** One of the barriers identified by the respondents was a lack of assertiveness by women. It is logical therefore that more assertiveness on the part of women should be viewed as a solution. The respondents felt that if women were more assertive, they would be able to drive their own careers and talk to the decision-makers about what they see as their career path, and ask for the right kind of assistance. Some of the comments were as follows: "It is okay to ask for help"; "Strong will is needed by women to change the status quo"; "Women should assert themselves more"; "Instil self management from elementary career stages".

**Leadership development programmes:** 21% of

respondents cited leadership development programmes for women as a possible solution. As noted earlier, only 54% of respondents reported that their company offered leadership development programmes, indicating a need for more effort in this regard. The provision of leadership programmes would seem to be a logical response to the lack of upward mobility of women. The observation that a little more than half of the employing companies provide such training is of great concern.

The efforts of companies might revolve around a “numbers game”. Booyesen (2007), for example, argues that organisations that emphasise quota filling as the main strategy for achieving equity are missing the point of true valuing of diversity. Emphasis should rather be placed on training and development to equip previously disadvantaged groups with competences they need to perform effectively.

**Employment equity:** The research suggests that the endeavours by the South African government to foster compliance to the Employment Equity Act are not achieving the desired results. A significant number of respondents cited legislation as one of the solutions to compel organisations to hasten the advancement of women in companies. Some women proposed that there should be fines imposed on the companies that do not comply. Some of the comments were: “Visible legal enforcement of labour laws”; “Government should set quotas and follow up on progress”; “Strong government regulation and fines to corporates not meeting the EE targets”.

The advent of the industry charters and the increasing emphasis being placed on broad-based BEE might galvanise organisations to take EE more seriously. As stated by Selby and Sutherland (2006), firms that fail to address the requirements of Government are likely to lose business in terms of financing, preferential procurement and other support. It remains to be seen whether the Acts will make a material difference to the behaviour of organisations over time. The indications so far is that more than a big stick is required if firms are going to change their profiles.

Some women were more outspoken in their responses and suggested that there is a need to “Get rid of old white men in organisations”; to “Look past colour”; and “Recruit more women leaders”. These responses reflect the view that some South African organisations are still dominated by white males and that this situation needs to be addressed. This can be resolved directly through imposed legislation or through companies making a more conscious effort to recruit more female leaders into the senior leadership roles.

**Flexible work/life opportunities:** The research revealed that some women felt that flexible work opportunities and work/life balance could provide solutions. However, only 10% felt that this was a requirement. This suggests that

most women have accepted their dual roles as mothers/wives and leaders and do not see a conflict in balancing these roles. Despite the low percentage, it is probably still desirable to have organizations provide opportunities that will give flexibility to women and allow them to excel both at home and work.

Eagli and Carli (2007) refer to this as the “family- friendly” policy which if companies could adopt, could ease women’s lives and help them thrive more in a business environment and minimize their guilt about not being able to meet their family demands. Other writers such as Bailyn and Harrington (2004) recommend “work- redesign” where the employees’ organizational and family needs are integrated. Ngambi (2001) has proposed job- sharing as another way in which women can be afforded the flexibility they might need to balance work and home demands.

**Education and training:** 20% of the women surveyed cited education and training as a possible solution. There were no significant response differences between women in different demographic categories. Some respondents suggested women-specific training such as “women only MBA’s” where women can interact freely without any male intervention and get to share and explore their experiences and craft their own solutions. Respondents also suggested: “Encouragement through bursaries, awarded to females, in male dominated industries (mining, construction, IT, etc)”; “Continuous advancement of one’s self through education and finding mentors”.

While not explored explicitly in the research, the question arises whether certain leadership development programmes should be designed for women only. The implied recommendation from the research is that women should have their own leadership programmes. However this would need to be balanced against the danger that such programmes are seen as “different” and by implication less valuable than integrated programmes. The alternative approach would be integrated programmes which address key issues faced by women in management amongst other topics, and with more women attending the leadership programmes than in the past. Such programmes would need to contain the elements for success such as blended learning approaches, experiential learning, coaching and mentoring support, and action-based learning.

**Coaching and mentorship:** A number of respondents felt that there is a great need for mentorship and coaching programmes for women. One in four cited this as a solution, whereas less than half indicated that their companies had such programmes in place. Other suggestions which were made were “Women in senior positions to be guided as to how to assist the junior female colleagues to grow”; “Encourage mentoring, coaching programmes”; “Share information, get advice and become more supportive of each other”; “Ensure that

each person has a mentor and coaches others in the workplace". It became clear from the responses that those surveyed feel that women themselves must take on the responsibility of helping one another and becoming their own champions.

**Support networks for women:** The research shows that women see the need for support networks as part of the solution to female advancement. Networks allow sharing of experiences and ideas which help women to identify with one another and craft solutions which benefit them all (Booyesen and Nkomo, 2010). Approximately, one in four respondents mentioned support networks as a solution. Some of their comments were: "Women to be each other's champions rather than pulling each other down"; "Women need to stand together and have one voice"; "Women need to start being more supportive of other women". Further comments included dealing with the male "old boys" club syndrome". One respondent went as far as saying "If you can't join them beat them, create your own networks - does not have to be the old boys club".

South African women have started to create these kind of networks through organizations such as the "Businesswomen's Association", "Destiny Connect" - a web based network tool provided by Destiny magazine, and many more. These networks provide women with leadership workshops where different leaders and role models from various organizations and industries share their experiences and give motivational talks to empower other aspiring woman leaders. They encourage women prosperity through awards such as "Businesswoman of the Year". These networks enable women to familiarize themselves with and gain access to the best South African women leaders and mentors.

**Socialisation:** The research indicated that the societal stereotypes that exist about a woman's place being in the home and men regarded as born leaders will need to be corrected through socialisation. This calls for different parenting methods where parents can instil the equality of sexes between boys and girls from childhood. Societal institutions such as churches and schools could also play a role in changing the old mentality that societies have grown accustomed to. The respondents in this study identified a few societal stereotypes as barriers. Some examples are: an "Old school mindset - a woman's place is in front of a stove, not a personal computer (PC)"; "Stereotyping by society that women are not leaders"; "Stereotypes that believe men are better leaders than women".

The proposed solutions which dealt with socialization were ideas such as "Raising confident and assertive women"; "Moms must raise girls the same way as boys"; "Educating the society that women can be leaders". Overall, the percentage that cited socialisation as a solution was 9% of the respondents.

**Self belief/confidence:** The final important barrier that was identified was women's lack of confidence and self-belief. Not surprisingly, 23% of respondents also referred to this as a solution. Some of the suggestions were: "Having a positive attitude and an open mind"; "Women believing in themselves as leaders"; "Increased self belief"; "Women need to trust themselves"; and the view that "Acknowledging that failure is part of the game".

In this part of the research, respondents refer to a number of "hard" solutions such as leadership development programmes, EE, and education and training. They also suggest certain "soft" issues such as the need for support networks, socialisation, and self belief. It is somewhat surprising that there was little explicit recognition of the fact that organisational culture and the climate existing in an organisation are key drivers of the desired behaviour. Reference to this will be made in the recommendations below.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study was to investigate what women think are the barriers, and possible solutions, to leadership advancement of women in corporation South Africa. It was prompted by the concerns raised in the leadership literature, the media and women's organisations, as well as the government's concern that the private sector is lagging behind the EE targets which they have set.

As far back at 1996, Human drew attention to this lack of progress by claiming that many companies look for quick fix solutions to their management and diversity challenges. She also argued that solutions take the form of workshops or interventions but these are not incorporated into the overall strategic and human resource management process. Furthermore, she noted that organisations are guilty of engaging in a numbers game and take lightly the fundamental cultural changes that the process requires.

The results of the research show that the women surveyed experience similar gender stereotypes regardless of age, race, education, and experience or management level. Respondents offered numerous solutions to the barriers which exist including the need for more leadership development programmes, targeted use of EE legislation, and coaching and mentorship. There was also repeated reference to the need for women to show more self-confidence and assertiveness as they take responsibility for improving their own chances of success. The importance of support networks for women, the relevance of role models, and the need for companies to be more sensitive to the needs for more flexible work arrangements were also highlighted.

This study should remind both government and the private sector about the magnitude of the challenge, the stereotypes and barriers that exist, which hamper

progress. It also highlights the psychological effects of discrimination on women and proposes solutions. The research should also raise the awareness of women themselves by providing a deeper understanding of the challenges other women face in their quest to take their rightful place alongside men in corporate South Africa.

The scope of the research was limited to women employed in different sectors of the economy. The women were in management roles at different stages of their careers. The results suggest that the societal stereotypes about women not being capable as men in leadership roles persist. Many women still believe that they are expected to play domestic roles, and carry out the more administrative functions in the workplace.

Despite the barriers and problems, there are women who have moved into top management positions. With enough support from organisations and the provision of family friendly policies and environments, women will thrive as they prove themselves to be competent leaders. There are now enough examples of women occupying the highest levels in public and private sectors to disprove the myths and stereotypes which have existed.

The private sector should take cognisance of the existence of gender discrimination and stereotypes about women's roles in the leadership hierarchy. To address the issues raised by the research, the sector needs to formulate policies that are aimed at supporting women and making it easier to balance the work-home demands. The role conflict is a reality that cannot be wished away. More can also be done to develop leadership programmes which are integrated with performance management, talent management, and succession planning.

Spouses have a role to play and need to acknowledge that they have a joint responsibility for family and household matters. If these responsibilities can be shared more equally, a woman's burden can be reduced with benefits for themselves and their organisations. No doubt that, men would benefit as well from the shared responsibility.

Women also need to be champions of other women. They need to support each other and present a united front against gender discrimination. They need to encourage dialogue and make their voices heard by government and employers so that they can advance their careers and make the contribution which the country requires.

A theme throughout the study was the observation that for organisations to increase, the representation of women in management, workplaces will need to become more inclusive (Cruz, 2006; Dreher, 2003; Temkin, 2003; Thomas, 2004). For such changes to be successful and sustainable, organisations will have to systematically break down the barriers constraining women's participation and effectiveness; improve their prevailing structures, policies and practices, and engender transformation in their climates and cultures.

In addition to external pressure placed on companies to

comply with legislation and industry charters, companies themselves have to believe that increasing diversity at management levels is both morally and competitively necessary. If they do, they will put in place the appropriate systems and measures to achieve the desired results.

Horwitz et al. (1996) point out that implementing EE as a component of human resource planning will not only ensure compliance with the legislative requirements but will also contribute directly to meeting strategic objectives. Selby and Sutherland (2006) go further when they propose that any EE strategy must be placed in the context of organisational change management. Plans and targets are a necessary but insufficient element of an EE approach; progress requires "planned transformational change processes". This in turn implies that organisational culture change also has to take place (Booyesen, 2007; Booyesen and Nkomo, 2010).

In the research, there were indirect references to the notion of organisational culture. Issues such as the attitudes of men, discriminatory climates, and the atmosphere in boardrooms are evidence that women are aware that their working environment often does not support their progress. The researchers expected this issue to be raised more explicitly in the study. The need for culture change is found repeatedly in the literature (Hakim, 2006; Human, 1996; Zanoni et al., 2010) and these writers are convinced that only when there is fundamental culture change, coupled with the necessary commitment from the top, will women advance in significant numbers. From the responses in this study, there may need to be a greater awareness amongst women that culture change is the key driver of progress and that the tactical issues of training programmes, flexible work arrangements, and support networks are subsidiary to culture change.

Has there been progress in the advancement of women in South Africa organisations? The statistics would suggest that there has been some movement, but there is no doubt that women are still vastly under-represented in organisations. The results of this research raise many of the issues that have existed for the past twenty years. It is of concern that the same factors hold women back today as in the past. It has to be concluded that fundamental changes is not taking place and women continue to struggle against the same barriers which have existed for many years, and very little progress has taken place.

## **PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERS**

Based on the research findings, leaders can promote the advancement of women in organisations by acknowledging that there remain serious attitudinal barriers to the advancement of women. In many cases, attitudes and stereotypes need to be changed by changing behaviour. Men in leadership positions need to set the example by showing their full support for women moving

up, providing the necessary support (training, coaching and mentorship), recruiting and promoting women into senior positions. Cases of overt and covert discrimination need to be dealt with firmly and visibly.

Secondly, leaders need to play their part in dealing with the practical challenges of women playing dual roles. In the research, there were many suggestions for making it easier for women to be success at work by enabling them to balance work and home responsibilities; companies need to increase their efforts to provide training and development and other mechanisms to prepare women for leadership. They need to do more to provide the necessary training and development for their women, including diversity training. It was disappointing that a significant number of women felt that not enough was being done.

In addition, the practical human resources (HR) systems of assessment, talent management, career planning and performance management also need to pro- actively support the advancement of women. These systems were referred to in the research as the "support mechanisms"; leaders can assist to make coaching and mentoring central to their programmes. From the research, it was clear that women experience significant psychological effects as they move up in organisations. These include depression, aggression, feelings of withdrawal, and loss of confidence. Executive coaching and mentoring by more senior, trusted individuals in the company would add considerable value; a fundamental point for leaders is to ensure that their company sees the need for female advancement.

In the research, the point was made that there has to be commitment from the top of the organisation. This has become a cliché but it remains one of the key ingredients before and real change will take place. Top management needs to be convinced that having more women in leadership will add significant value to the business. Leaders need to understand the socialisation factors which hamper women in business. There was frequent mention in the research of the many subtle ways in which women and men are socialised, leading to many assumptions and attitudes which affect how women are treated in organisations. It is beyond the scope of companies to change socialisation patterns, but understanding them and dealing with their manifestations in companies is required; despite considerable debate, this research has supported the need for targets and quotas.

The limitations of EE legislation and industry codes have been referred to elsewhere, but there is a place for the establishment of clear goals for the advancement of women in an organisation; leaders can help women to help themselves. The research made mention of women not supporting each other on the one hand, and the need for support networks on the other. Leaders can support the formal and informal creation of support networks within and across companies; leaders need to understand and take account of the central role played by organisational

culture. This remains the most important and intractable feature of a successful strategy. The research drew attention to this, though indirectly. From the literature and the experience of the authors, significant progress will not be made until the culture and atmosphere in organisations change to embrace the notion that women need to advance in the organisation for moral but also practical reasons. The other tactics mentioned above are necessary, but system change will only occur when attitudes, perceptions and organisational culture change. There is no quick fix and this article does not provide the route map, but it draws attention to culture change as a primary factor which will change the status quo.

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