



**INTERSECTIONALITY IN CORPORATE SOUTH AFRICA: THE
EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN BLACK FEMALE LEADERS**

by

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ABSTRACT

Research on gender inequality focuses on the two main biases against women: (1) agentic deficiency (perceptions that women have minimal leadership potential); and (2) agentic penalty (a backlash against counter-stereotypical behaviour from certain women). There has generally been an assumption that the stereotypes upon which these biases are based are comparable for women across racial groups. South Africa, despite having significant racial and ethnic diversity, suffers from a lack of research that targets respondents by race and gender. This naïve gender-biased approach does not fully consider the critical intersectional differences that exist for women. In studies specific to South Africa, the lenses of both race and gender are often used to examine the perceptions of women as leaders. These views, which are limited to only gender and race, do not completely represent Black women, however, because gender intersections introduce simultaneous processes for identity and interdependent systems of disadvantage. These theories also do not elaborate on the lived experiences of South African Black women in corporate leadership roles.

The researcher conducted a qualitative research study and interviewed 25 Black females who held various senior leadership positions in different industries in South Africa. The researcher applied a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to uncover the lived experiences of the group of respondents. The aim was to document their lived experiences and establish how those experiences related to constructs from existing literature on the leadership dynamics of race, gender, class, and intersectionality. The research findings capture the essence of the lived experiences of professional Black females and provide context as to why there continues to be a gap in the representation of this group in senior leadership positions, despite the efforts of affirmative action policies from the government. The findings highlight and demonstrate how this group is challenged and sometimes held back by the dynamics of intersectionality, class, race, gender, and other processes of identity. The research goes on to describe further research opportunities on how identity and interdependent systems of disadvantage impact Black female leadership performance over time. There is an opportunity to further explore how human resource policies and educational frameworks can contribute towards harnessing and developing this group, to increase their capacity and greater participation in senior- and executive-level roles.

Keywords: African black female leadership, gender inequality, hermeneutic phenomenological approach, intersectionality, lived experiences, racial and ethnic diversity

DECLARATION

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Date: 16th October 2024

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

B-BBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
CAQDAS	Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CEE	Commission of Employment Equity
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CRT	Critical Race Theory
DEL	Department of Employment and Labour
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
EAP	Economically Active Population
FMCG	Fast-Moving Consumer Goods
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LDP	Leadership Development Programme
LGBTQIA	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual
MSF	Multisource Feedback
StatsSA	Statistics South Africa
WHO	World Health Organisation

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THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN BLACK FEMALE LEADERS IN CORPORATE SOUTH AFRICA

1 BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In South Africa, prior to 1994, there were very few women in positions of leadership; most top positions in both the public and private sectors were dominated by White males. Table 1 below shows the representation of each population group from 1994 (the year of the democratic elections and South Africa moving out of the Apartheid regime) to 1996 (two years post-democratic elections and the introduction of transformation policies).

In South Africa, Black is a generic term that incorporates African Blacks, Coloureds, Asians, and Indians who are South African residents by birth or descent. This study focused on the population group named African Females (CEE, 2023; DTI, 2003b).

Table 1. Legislators, senior officials, and managers in South Africa by population group and gender (1994-1996)

Year	Total %		Asians %			Coloureds %			Whites %			Blacks %		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F
1994	78	22	6	5	1	5	4	1	58	46	12	31	23	8
1995	78	22	7	6	1	4	3	1	58	46	12	31	23	8
1996	72	28	8	6	2	8	5	3	57	41	16	27	20	7

Source: Booysen (1999, p.16)

There were few changes in the three years listed above, especially for Black females. In 1996, there was a notable shift in the White male percentage, however, which dropped by 6% and gave gains to the rest of the population groups. Yet this shift resulted in just a 1% increase in representation for the Black female population (Booyesen, 1999).

After the 1994 democratic elections, there was an influx of women into the labour force due to political and socioeconomic efforts to improve gender equality in the workplace. This, however, did not have the desired impact in its initial stages, thus the policy reforms of the country needed to be more inclusive of previously disadvantaged groups (referred to as Black).

In 2003, the South African government promulgated the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act to address the inequalities entrenched by the Apartheid regime. B-BBEE is a voluntary initiative that influences businesses to participate in order to get good scores that will gain them government contracts as well as other economic benefits (Booyesen, 1999; Department of Trade and Industry [DTI], 2003a).

Similarly, the Employment Equity Act was introduced in 1998 to move organisations towards creating employment equity and eradicating unfair discrimination against previously disadvantaged groups. To support this, the Department of Labour provided codes of good practice to ensure compliance. These codes are not law, however, and allow employers to exercise their discretion on how they plan to apply them to suit their environment. To track progress, the Commission of Employment Equity (CEE) was introduced, which releases reports on an annual basis (Department of Employment and Labour [DEL], 2023).

The aforementioned pieces of legislation have been instrumental in breaking down barriers and fostering greater inclusivity for previously disadvantaged groups in both the business arena and the labour force. These legal frameworks have served as catalysts for positive change, paving the way for increased representation and participation of individuals from historically marginalised backgrounds. The impact of these laws has been evident in the improvements observed across various industries, including an increase in the number of women in leadership positions. The biggest strides have been made in the public sector, however, as the private sector still lags behind (see Table 2) (Booyesen, 1999; DTI, 2003b).

When comparing the CEE reports for 2016-2017 and 2022-2023, it can be seen that female representation in top management increased by just 1.4% (44.8% to 45.4%) (CEE, 2017; 2023). The persistently skewed gender ratios across various industries highlights a systemic challenge that extends beyond mere representation. Despite concerted efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, wage disparities, and the 'glass ceiling' underscore the need for more comprehensive and sustained initiatives to bridge the gender gap and create truly equitable work environments (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021).

During that same time period, Black African males and females grew by 2% to 80% of the economically active population (EAP). This population, as defined by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) (2023), includes people between the ages of 15 to 64 years who are either employed or unemployed but seeking employment. The EAP is a benchmark used to support businesses with the analysis of their workforce and gives a numeric indication of where there could be an

over- or under-representation of a particular population group (CEE, 2017; 2023; StatsSA, 2023).

Table 2. Economically active population by population group and gender (2016-2017)

POPULATION GROUP	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
African	42.8%	35.1%	78.0%
Coloured	5.3%	4.5%	9.8%
Indian	1.8%	1.0%	2.8%
White	5.3%	4.2%	9.5%
TOTAL	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%

Source: CEE (2017, p.43)

Year of assessment: 2022-2023

MALE			FEMALE			Total
AM	African Male	43.4%	AF	African Female	36.6%	80.0%
CM	Coloured Male	4.9%	CF	Coloured Female	4.4%	9.3%
IM	Indian Male	1.7%	IF	Indian Female	1.0%	2.7%
WM	White Male	4.5%	WF	White Female	3.5%	8.0%
Total		54.5%			45.5%	100.0%

Source: CEE (2023, p.37)

CEE reports also highlight the composition of top management by population. Figure 1 illustrates that in 2016-2017, the top management positions in South Africa were dominated by White males. Similarly, in the report for 2022-2023, White males dominate the top leadership positions, albeit with a decline of 6.1%. The total EAP percentage for both White females and males accounted for 8% in 2022-2023, yet they continued to dominate the top management positions (CEE, 2017; CEE, 2023).

In the report for 2022-2023, it can be seen that the occupation of top management positions by the Black African population is just 16.9%, despite their contribution to the economically active population being 80%. This discrepancy is a matter of concern as it fails to reflect the diverse demographics of the country. Addressing this issue is crucial for achieving equal representation and promoting inclusivity within the corporate sector (CEE, 2023). In this study, the African population group, and women in particular, are focused on.

Year of Assessment: 2016-2017

Year of Assessment: 2022-2023

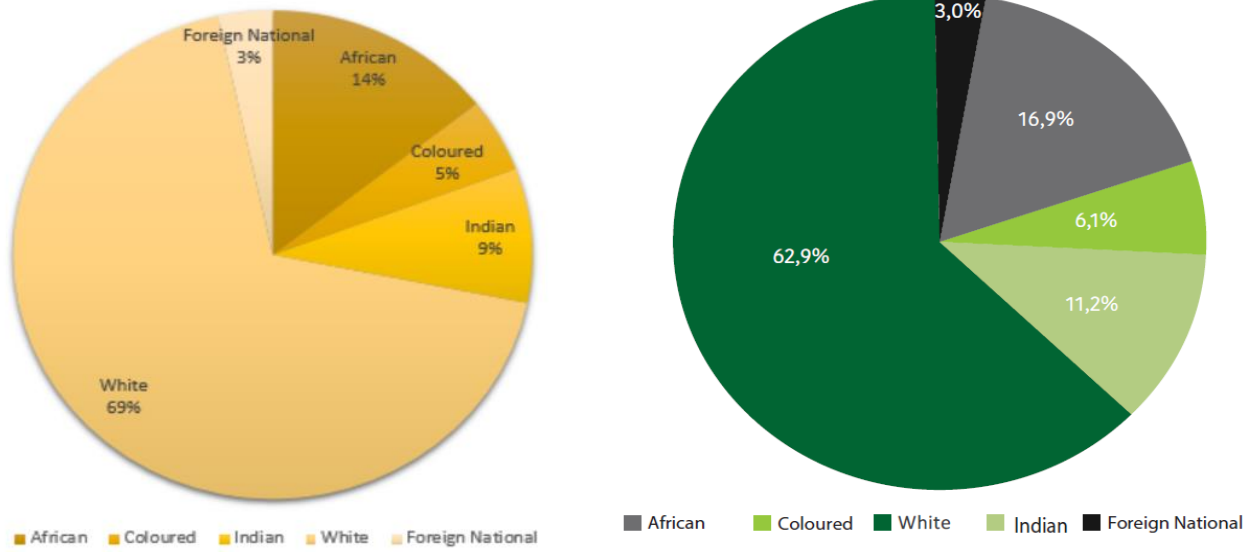


Figure 1. Top management by population group

Source: CEE (2017, p.26); CEE (2023, p.37)

Figure 2 below illustrates that both the government and the private sector employ significantly more males than females.



Figure 2. Employment gender split: Government and private sector

Source: CEE (2023, p.39)

The report further shows (see Table 3) that the White population group dominates the top management level in the private sector, with White males accounting for 52.6% and White females accounting for 13.2% of the roles at that level. African males account for just 8.4% of the top management roles, with African females at the low end of representation with 5.4%, despite accounting for 36.6% of the total EAP. Table 3 also shows that the White population group is dominant in the private sector with a total representation percentage of 65.8%, as well as in educational institutions with a total percentage of 59.3% (CEE, 2023).

Table 3. Top management level by business, type, population group and gender

BUSINESS TYPE	Male				Female				Foreign National		TOTAL
	AM	CM	IM	WM	AF	CF	IF	WF	FM	FF	
EAP	43.4%	4.9%	1.7%	4.5%	36.6%	4.4%	1.0%	3.5%	NA	NA	100%
National Government	41.1%	4.0%	2.9%	6.1%	35.5%	3.2%	3.7%	3.2%	0.3%	0.0%	100.0%
Provincial Government	47.7%	7.0%	3.1%	4.6%	27.2%	4.0%	3.4%	2.8%	0.0%	0.3%	100.0%
Local Government	46.6%	10.1%	3.0%	6.9%	24.6%	3.9%	1.1%	3.7%	0.1%	0.0%	100.0%
Private Sector	8.4%	3.4%	7.8%	52.6%	5.4%	2.4%	3.8%	13.2%	2.5%	0.5%	100.0%
Non-Profit Organisations	25.8%	6.1%	4.0%	20.4%	14.9%	4.3%	2.7%	17.0%	3.0%	1.9%	100.0%
State Owned Enterprises	39.0%	3.9%	5.2%	9.7%	26.8%	3.7%	4.0%	6.3%	1.2%	0.2%	100.0%
Educational Institutions	14.3%	2.8%	4.2%	30.5%	10.8%	3.1%	2.9%	28.8%	2.0%	0.6%	100.0%

Source: CEE (2023, p.42)

Furthermore, CEE (2023) highlighted where promotion and skills development opportunities were directed in the movement of the workforce to top management positions. As evidenced in Table 4 below, a significant percentage (49.5%) of opportunities for promotion was directed to the White population, with White males dominating. Similarly, almost half (49.4%) of skills development opportunities were directed to the White population group, with White males dominating. When it comes to recruitment, however, almost every opportunity (99.6%) was directed to African males for the period 2022-2023. These statistics demonstrate the continued under-representation of African females in top management.

Table 4. Workforce movement at top management level by population group and gender

	Male				Female				Foreign National		TOTAL
	AM	CM	IM	WM	AF	CF	IF	WF	FM	FF	
EAP	43.4%	4.9%	1.7%	4.5%	36.6%	4.4%	1.0%	3.5%	NA	NA	100%
Workforce profile-all employers	10.3%	3.6%	7.5%	49.7%	6.6%	2.5%	3.7%	13.2%	2.4%	0.6%	100.0%
Recruitment	99.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Promotion	13.5%	3.9%	9.5%	32.6%	10.6%	4.5%	5.7%	16.9%	1.8%	1.0%	100.0%
Terminations	14.9%	3.8%	7.3%	42.1%	9.7%	2.5%	3.1%	11.8%	3.8%	0.9%	100.0%
Skills Development	15.7%	3.9%	9.3%	35.2%	12.1%	3.9%	5.6%	14.2%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%

Source: CEE (2023, p.42)

The global landscape of corporate environments reveals a striking under-representation of female leaders, creating a scarcity of diverse role models in leadership positions. This scarcity not only limits the visibility of female leadership, but also poses a particular challenge for African Black female leaders. Their experiences, often distinct and shaped by unique cultural and socio-economic contexts, are regrettably underrepresented and inadequately documented. In the broader dialogue on female leadership, there tends to be a predominant lens through which experiences are interpreted, often derived from the more prevalent narratives of White female leaders. This oversight perpetuates a homogenised understanding of women in leadership roles, disregarding the nuanced challenges and triumphs that African Black female leaders encounter on their professional journeys (Beckwith et al., 2016).

The sociodynamics that shape the experiences of African Black female leaders differs significantly from those of their White counterparts. Recognising this distinction is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and dynamics that influence the professional journeys of these leaders. It is imperative that studies exploring the experiences of African female leaders take into account the complex intersections of race and gender, as these factors intricately intertwine and profoundly influence their professional landscapes (Crenshaw, 1989; Curtis, 2017; Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

African Black women in South Africa face unique challenges in leadership roles due to historical inequities and intersecting factors of race and gender. Post-apartheid legislation aimed at rectifying past injustices, yet gender inequalities persist, with Black women underrepresented in executive positions. The intersectionality of race and gender shapes their experiences, influencing leadership behaviours and opportunities. South Africa's economic

growth is hindered by gender gaps in leadership, emphasising the need for transformative leadership and gender mainstreaming. Research highlights the importance of understanding the bicultural perspective of Black women and the impact of societal norms on their career evolution. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that considers the unique challenges faced by African Black women in leadership roles in South Africa (Johnson & Thomas, 2012; Mashele & Alagidele, 2022; Ramnund-Mansingh, 2022; Roos, 2020).

The evolution of South African black women's experiences of race and gender oppression since the end of Apartheid reflects a complex interplay of progress and persistent challenges. The end of apartheid and the establishment of B-BBEE in 2003 to address the inequality issues that were entrenched by the Apartheid regime marked a significant turning point for previously disadvantaged groups (DTI, 2003a). This was a bigger turning point for women, who had suffered under the compounded oppressions of racism and sexism. However, despite these constitutional and legislative advancements, African Black women continued to navigate a landscape marked by enduring forms of discrimination and inequality (Simpson, 2023).

African Black women still encounter stereotypes and biases that hinder their professional recognition and advancement. The intersection of race and gender is a multifaceted form of discrimination, particularly affecting African Black women in leadership roles who struggle to be heard and acknowledged. Persistent stereotypes, such as being viewed as aggressive or dominant, continue to shape perceptions of their leadership styles. Nevertheless, there has been increasing awareness and efforts to support African Black women leaders, aiming to enhance their representation and influence in the workplace (Moleko, 2019).

African Black women leaders encounter distinctive challenges due to intersectionality, navigating discrimination and violations of their human rights that set their experiences apart from those of White women in the workplace. These challenges can include facing systemic barriers that intersect race and gender, leading to unique forms of bias and obstacles in their professional journeys (Ramnund-Mansingh, 2022; Roos, 2020).

1.2 Problem statement

Research on gender inequality focuses on the two main biases against women, i.e., (1) agentic deficiency (perceptions that women have minimal leadership potential); and (2) agentic penalty (a backlash against counter-stereotypical behaviour from certain women). It has generally been assumed that the stereotypes upon which these biases are based are comparable for women across racial groups (Rosette et al., 2016), yet South Africa, as a country with significant racial

and ethnic diversity, suffers from a lack of research that targets race and gender respondents. This naïve bias-gender approach does not fully take into consideration the critical intersectional differences that exist for women (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010; Reimers & April, 2022; Syster et al., 2023). Booyesen and Nkomo (2010) revealed that despite the significant body of research on the phenomenon of think-manager, think-male (Schein, 1973; 2007), there is insufficient research addressing the lived experiences of women in managerial and leadership positions. Intersectional research that does link women, colour and leadership in studies specific to South Africa, such as in the work of Miyen and April (2022), Myeza and April (2021), and Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), uses the lens of both race and gender to examine the perceptions of women as leaders. These studies reveal that for African Black females, the lack of representation in leadership roles is due to specific factors such as discriminatory hiring practices, inconsistencies in promotion procedures, resistance to change, and the continued existence of men-dominated networks (boys' clubs) in corporations.

African Black women face unique challenges that stem from the interconnected nature of race and gender. Intersectionality theory recognises that these two dimensions of identity are not separate, but rather intersect and influence each other. This understanding is crucial in comprehending the complex experiences and realities that African Black women encounter in various aspects of their lives. Within the framework of intersectionality, race and gender are not isolated entities, but mutually constituting factors that shape African Black women's lives; it acknowledges that the experience of being a woman and being Black cannot be understood independently. Instead, they are intertwined, interacting forces that work together to create a distinct set of advantages and disadvantages, forming a complex and nuanced web where the positive aspects reinforce each other while the drawbacks compound, necessitating a holistic understanding of these dynamic relationships for effective navigation (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

In the context of racial and gender dynamics, African Black women often face unique challenges that influence their experiences in various aspects of life. These challenges stem from the intersecting systems of race and gender, which affect African Black women in areas such as education, employment, healthcare, and social interactions. In the realm of education, African Black women may encounter obstacles that hinder their access to quality education; factors such as racial biases, stereotyping, and limited resources can limit their opportunities for academic success. These barriers may perpetuate societal inequalities, further contributing to achievement gaps among African Black women. Moreover, employment prospects for

African Black women can be influenced by more than just race and gender intersections, but also by language and accents, as well as educational- and socio-economic backgrounds (April, Dharani & April, 2023). Such systemic biases may affect job opportunities, may induce discrimination on a personal level during hiring processes and career progression, being sidelined from decision-making channels, and have real effects in terms of pay equity (Bhorat & Yoga, 2013; Myeza & April, 2021; Oyenubi & Mosomi, 2024). Also, African Black women often face challenges in breaking through glass ceilings and may find themselves navigating hostile work environments (April, Dreyer & Blass, 2007; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; Deist, 2024).

Crenshaw (1985), Rosette and Livingston (2012) and Rosette et al. (2016) posited that within the realm of healthcare, the intersection of race and gender plays a profound role in shaping the experiences of African Black women. This intersectionality introduces a layer of complexity that extends beyond mere healthcare provision, influencing access, quality of care, and health outcomes. Unfortunately, systemic racism and gender biases can contribute to persistent disparities, creating a landscape where African Black women may face unique challenges in their healthcare journeys. Access to healthcare services remains a critical concern, as African Black women may encounter barriers ranging from geographical disparities to financial constraints, limiting their ability to seek timely and comprehensive medical care.

Systemic racism can exacerbate these challenges, leading to the unequal distribution of healthcare resources and hindering the provision of essential services to marginalised communities. African Black women thus experience higher rates of chronic illnesses and maternal mortality, as well as less access to reproductive healthcare services. Furthermore, the intersectionality of race, gender, language and socio-economic background can shape African Black women's experiences in social interactions. Stereotypes and prejudices based on both race and gender can marginalise and isolate African Black women within their communities. They may face microaggressions, racial profiling, questioning of their credibility and other forms of discrimination, which can have detrimental effects on their mental well-being and social integration (Crenshaw, 1989; Ebrahim, Botha & Snowball, 2013; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Rosette et al., 2016).

African Black females make up 80.7% of the total female group in the economically active population of the country (Commission for Employment Equity, 2024), yet these theories do

not elaborate on the lived experiences of South African Black women in corporate leadership roles. Additionally, these theories do not elaborate on how context-specific challenges contribute to their lack of representation in senior leadership roles, and the psychological and behavioural effects resulting from such marginalisation. There is thus a need to delve deeper into the understanding of how context-specific challenges, such as cultural, societal, or organisational factors, hinder the representation of Black female leaders in senior roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; April et al., 2007; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Miyen & April, 2022).

1.3 Research questions

1.3.1 Main research question

What are the lived experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa?

1.3.2 Sub-questions

Given the main research question, and in keeping with each of the constructs in the extant literature, the sub-questions that were explored were:

Race dynamics

How has race played, or how does it still play, a role in African Black female leaders' legitimacy?

Gender dynamics

How do African Black female leaders see their gender playing a role in progressing or holding them back in their careers?

Documented experiences

How do African Black female leaders' experiences differ to those of previous or existing theories that have been published?

Intersectionality

How do different aspects of African Black female leaders' identity play a role in how they experience leadership in relation to their male counterparts?

Class dynamics

How have African Black female leaders' socio-economic backgrounds played, or continue to play, a role in their legitimacy as leaders?

1.4 Contribution

This study sought to contribute to, and build on, the largely Anglo-American theories on African Black female experiences in the workplace, as well as address the limited research currently available on the critical intersectional differences that exist for African Black women in South Africa. In the context of South Africa, there are limited known and peer-reviewed studies, for instance, Booysen and Nkomo (2010), Jaga et al. (2018), Miyen and April (2022), and Myeza and April (2021).

Certain studies, including theses and books, have demonstrated how intersectionality continues to influence leadership experiences for African Black females. Historically, South Africa has been plagued by systemic inequality, including, but not limited to, the following:

1. **Historical inequities:** The legacy of apartheid has left deep-rooted racial and gender inequalities that continue to affect opportunities for African Black women. Historical discrimination has limited access to education, employment opportunities, and leadership roles, creating systemic barriers to advancement. Black women leaders in South Africa continue to navigate the enduring legacies of these historical race and gender injustices. Specifically, they confront the ongoing challenges stemming from post-apartheid racial disparities and the side-lining of gender inequalities (Booyesen, 1999; Roos, 2020). In this context, African Black females have developed strategies to discover hope within hopelessness for dealing with racial and gender inequalities. It is within these coping mechanisms that a new style of leadership emerges, warranting further exploration. Furthermore, this underscores the resilience characteristics that provide a sense of positivity in the face of despair (Phendla, 2004).
2. **Intersectional discrimination:** African Black women experience intersectional discrimination based on race, gender, societal expectations and economic backgrounds. This compounded discrimination often results in limited access to resources, lower wages, and increased challenges in career progression compared to their male or White counterparts. As the shift towards democracy was happening in South Africa, there was an emergence of a critical area of research which drew some parallels to the United

States of America's Civil Rights Act of 1964, which forced American organisations to restructure every institution across all sectors in terms of diversity. Post the apartheid regime, South Africa's legislative (B-BBEE) shift to equality was predominantly focused on race (Booyesen, 1999; DTI, 2003b; U.S. Department of Labor, 2021).

Therefore, even though the democratic government of South Africa post-1994 made a conscious effort to improve racial inequalities, gender inequalities were often relegated to the fringes of transformation initiatives. Despite some legislative efforts aimed at promoting gender equality and transformation in South Africa, the effective implementation of these policies at the organisational level is still lacking. This has resulted in continued disparities in representation and opportunities for African Black female leaders (Johnson & Thomas, 2012; Mabokela, 2001; Ramnund-Mansingh, 2022; Shung-King et al., 2018; Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

3. Resistance to leadership: South African Black female leaders can encounter resistance in their leadership roles, for example male colleagues resigning rather than reporting to an African Black woman. An illustration of this occurred when Snowy Khoza assumed the role of Executive Chair at Bigen Africa, a South African infrastructure development company operating across the African continent. Following Khoza's appointment, 70 men within her hierarchy resigned due to their reluctance to report to a woman, particularly a Black woman. The compounded challenges of her gender and race contributed to resistance towards her leadership within the organisation – this unique Black phenomenon is known as the double jeopardy of race and gender (Ose, 2018; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Ramnund-Mansingh, 2022).
4. Limited access to networks and mentoring: African Black female leaders often face challenges accessing the influential networks and mentorship opportunities that are crucial for career growth and leadership development. The resulting absence of supportive networks means African Black women lack the strategic relationships that are necessary for successful leadership (Johnson & Thomas, 2012; Ramnund-Mansingh, 2022; Roos, 2020).
5. Organisational culture and practices: Some organisational cultures are unwelcoming or resistant to diversity and inclusion practices, making it challenging for African Black

women to thrive and advance. Biased hiring practices, unequal opportunities for advancement, and limited representation in decision-making positions can reinforce systemic barriers (Roos, 2020).

6. Work-life balance challenges: African Black women leaders often face unique work-life balance challenges due to societal expectations and responsibilities, including caregiving roles and household duties. Balancing these responsibilities with demanding leadership roles can impact their ability to fully focus on their professional development and organisational leadership. The intersection of race, gender and leadership also poses a challenge for African Black females in organisations, which causes them to exit the system, thereby exacerbating the issue of under-representation (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Kea-Edwards et al., 2023).

Understanding and addressing these systemic issues requires comprehensive efforts from scholars, organisations, policymakers, and society at large to dismantle barriers, promote inclusivity, and create environments where African Black female leaders can thrive and lead organisations successfully. This study adds to the extant knowledge of the intersectional experiences of African Black women in leadership positions, particularly in South Africa given the historical predisposition of Apartheid and racial segregation. While progress has been made in dismantling apartheid, the legacy of exclusion and marginalisation continues to affect the advancement of African Black women in leadership positions across the country.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the existing theories on the highlighted theory constructs are explored to gain an in-depth view of what has been written to support and build the research and answer the research questions. To understand African Black females in leadership, the researcher endeavoured to discover the essence of their experiences as defined by key components in the existing literature. Figure 3 outlines the framework of the literature constructs that helped create the parameters for the research and assisted with navigating the patterns that emerged. The researcher further aimed to identify how each of the components contributed to the phenomenon under investigation.

Prior to commencing any research, it is imperative to examine the existing body of knowledge. This step lays the foundation for understanding the current state of research within the field and helps identify gaps or areas requiring further exploration. Underestimating the importance of this process can hinder the effectiveness and validity of the research findings. Scrutiny and assimilation of the existing knowledge on the phenomenon thus served as an essential prerequisite to create deeper meaning in the study (Levy & Ellis, 2006).

In the literature review, the leadership dynamics that are at play for females as a whole are explored and juxtaposed against those of African Black females. This highlights the differences in their experiences while highlighting topics or dynamics that are missing within the various bodies of work that have been completed on the female gender in the workplace.

Drawing from documented lived experiences, particularly those of Black females, this study explored the complex interplay of intersectional identities and leadership dynamics. By contextualising the discussion within both global theories and the specific realities of South Africa, the research methodology for this study was carefully constructed. By focusing on the current challenges faced by African Black females, this section aimed to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and analysing the complex nature of leadership experiences of African Black females in diverse organisational settings.



Figure 3. Conceptual framework

Source: Author's own construct

2.2 Leadership and gender dynamics in corporate environments

A study by Phadke and Sitaraman (2016) gave a historical context on why people tend to make different attributions to the same set of behaviours that are shown by a male and a female. When assessed against males, females tend to be measured more harshly because of the stereotypes attached to them. The historical context of these stereotypes began during the Industrial Revolution, which shifted the roles and responsibility expectations that society had for women, hence the gender stereotypes that are still attached to women. The 1940s brought about a change in leadership theories, when situational leadership was introduced to highlight that different leadership styles were appropriate for different situations and tasks (Hollander & Offerman, 1990).

Phadke and Sitaraman (2016) also revealed the dynamics of gender stereotypes and how these affect women working in corporate environments. Their study highlighted the negative effects that stereotypes have in establishing leadership styles in the workplace, as well as the effort required to address sociocultural factors that negatively contribute to how women are perceived at work.

In their study on role congruity theory, Eagly and Karau (2002) explored the prejudice suffered by female leaders due to the differentiated expectations about the actual and ideal behaviour that women and men should portray, based on expected social roles. They claimed that the role congruity theory of prejudice towards females proposes a role incongruity between the female gender role and the leadership roles. This role incongruity leads to two forms of prejudices: (1)

females are perceived less favourably than males as occupants of leadership roles; and (2) typical leadership behaviours are evaluated negatively when enacted by females. These perceptions negatively affect how many women attain high-ranking positions.

McIntosh (1989, p.1) stated that “many people—especially women—experience feelings of fraudulence when singled out for praise, press publicity or promotion”. This feeling is known as ‘The Imposter Syndrome’. McIntosh went on to explain that stereotype threats are the underlying reason why women in leadership positions tend to be disengaged and demotivated, even though they manage to find practices that help them to be resilient and stay on course. The issue to be addressed is thus the impact it has on their confidence.

Stereotype threats are defined as situations where negative stereotypes can negatively impact the performance and aspirations of the individuals who are stigmatised. They can also undermine motivation and trust in the workplace (Kaye & Pennington, 2016). Experiencing stereotype threats constantly and chronically leads to women exiting corporate environments because of the feeling of not being able to take it any longer. The overall impact of stereotype threats for women extends beyond decreased performance, however. Research has shown that stereotype threats have contributed to the selection of inefficient strategies and not being able to change because of fear. They also increase the inability of women to persevere amid difficult or stressful conditions, and they undermine women’s sense of belonging, which in turn undermines their motivation and achievement (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016).

Building on the insights from a study by Sandberg and Scovell (2013), the concept of stereotype threat emerges as a significant factor influencing individual performance. Their research highlighted that the psychological phenomenon wherein individuals, upon becoming aware of negative stereotypes associated with their social or demographic group, may experience heightened pressure and anxiety. This heightened awareness can, in turn, lead individuals to inadvertently conform to the negative expectations set by those stereotypes.

In the context of workplace dynamics, stereotype threat becomes a lens through which to understand the challenges faced by individuals who are aware of prevailing stereotypes related to their gender, race, or other identity factors. The acknowledgment of these stereotypes can create a cognitive burden, impacting cognitive processes and decision-making.

Nelson and Burke (2000) argued that a lack of experience and time in the workforce pipeline are important factors that contribute to the scarcity of female representation in senior

management positions. This argument, however, was based on the perceptions of male leaders; female leaders have argued that corporate culture is their biggest barrier. These differing views on the stumbling blocks facing women cause an even bigger challenge for women who seek to move up the corporate ladder, because male leaders do not generally see culture as being a barrier.

Eagly and Karau (2022) explained this as the Role Congruity theory, which describes how gender and leadership roles produce two types of prejudices, i.e., (1) women are less preferred for leadership positions; and (2) prescribed leadership behaviours are evaluated less favourably when the leadership role is occupied by a woman. These prejudices then bring about a reality where women leaders experience negative attitudes in the workplace.

These persistent prejudices towards female leaders not only poses significant challenges for women striving to succeed in the workplace, but also reflects deeply ingrained societal perceptions about the alignment of certain characteristics with leadership roles. This phenomenon becomes particularly pronounced when societal expectations clash with the perceived attributes required for effective leadership. The biases create a challenging barrier for women in leadership positions, setting them up for potential failure. The incongruence perceived between the characteristics traditionally associated with being a woman and the stereotypical traits ascribed to effective leaders creates a paradox. In the eyes of society, these dual role characteristics—womanhood and leadership—seem not to harmonise, perpetuating a damaging narrative that questions the legitimacy and capability of women in leadership roles (Eagly & Karau 2022).

The perceptions outlined above also contribute to the assumptions highlighted in the study by Okimoto and Heilman (2012) where they purported that women are bad parents. Women tend to carry the burden of being perceived as non-committal and inefficient because of family obligations that are generally faced by both male and female parents. They also carry the burden of cultural beliefs that deem them relationship-oriented and therefore not strong enough to hold leadership positions, as being relationship-oriented is not associated with characteristics of success in the workplace, especially in leadership positions.

This dynamic holds negative consequences for women who are mothers. The assumption that mothers are ineffective in the workplace adds further stress to women, thereby increasing the feeling of inadequacy at home and in the workplace. This dilemma that mothers tend to find themselves in increases their likelihood of exiting the workplace to focus on parenting. This

decision is less likely to affect males, because the aforementioned societal assumptions tend to favour male dominance and they in turn tend to thrive in the workplace (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012).

Nelson and Burke (2000) raised an argument in their study that challenged the perception that women are intolerant of high stress, thereby making them unsuitable for the pressures that come with senior leadership. Their study proved that when women move higher in an organisation, their level of engagement increases and they are more likely to experience increased job satisfaction as opposed to being disengaged. The more engaging and value-driven a particular occupation is, the more active women tend to be in those roles as they would prefer the quality of work more than just being employed.

The above theories highlight the dynamics applicable to women as a whole, yet the dynamics for African Black females are more nuanced. African Black female leaders continue to experience a lack of representation in leadership positions because of specific factors such as the corporate environment itself. A resistance to change and the discriminatory nature of the recruitment and promotion process make it difficult to break through the levels of seniority. This is also exacerbated by the gate-keeping nature of the “old boys’ club” (Syster, Daya & April, 2023; Miyen & April, 2022).

The underrepresentation of African Black women in managerial roles within South Africa's corporate sector remains a persistent issue, despite the introduction of progressive legislation like the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998. This Act was designed to promote equity and diversity within the workforce, yet many reports indicate that its effectiveness has been significantly undermined. The private sector continues to be dominated by white males in leadership positions, effectively marginalising Black women from key roles (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021). This ongoing imbalance reflects a broader societal issue where systemic inequalities hinder true representation and inclusion, even in the face of legislative efforts aimed at rectifying historical injustices.

A critical factor contributing to this lack of representation is systemic discrimination, which manifests in the various barriers that African Black women encounter in their professional lives. Research has consistently identified a "glass ceiling" phenomenon that is particularly pronounced for Black women, who face unique challenges resulting from both racial and gender biases (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021). These intersecting forms of discrimination complicate their advancement and often result in limited opportunities for professional growth.

Studies indicate that while White women may also experience obstacles, the compounded effects of race and gender for Black women create an environment where they are disproportionately disadvantaged (Lues, 2005).

The historical context of apartheid further complicates the professional landscape for African Black women in South Africa. Decades of institutionalised racism have entrenched cultural and organisational barriers that continue to affect their career trajectories (Phendla, 2004). This legacy of inequality not only affects their immediate opportunities, but also shapes the perceptions and biases that persist in the workplace. Many African Black women find themselves navigating a corporate environment that is not only unwelcoming, but often actively hostile, which can severely impact their morale and aspirations. In addition to these systemic challenges, the lack of supportive networks and mentorship is a significant barrier to the advancement of African Black women in the corporate sphere (Dillard, 2016).

Research suggests that these women often do not have access to the professional support systems that are essential for navigating complex corporate landscapes. The absence of mentorship and peer support can lead to feelings of isolation and disenfranchisement, making it even more challenging for African Black women to assert themselves and advocate for their professional interests (Tootle, 2024).

Creating inclusive environments that foster community support is essential for empowering African Black female leaders. Studies have shown that the development of mentorship programs and professional networks can significantly enhance the career trajectories of Black women (Phendla, 2004). Such initiatives not only provide crucial resources and guidance, but also facilitate shared experiences and collective resilience. By establishing these supportive structures, organisations can help mitigate some of the challenges that Black women face and promote a more equitable workplace.

To address the persistent barriers to representation, it is imperative for organisations to implement stricter policies that ensure accountability and promote inclusivity. Some scholars argue for the introduction of a quota system, which would mandate the appointment of qualified Black women to leadership positions (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021). This approach could serve as a proactive measure to ensure that the corporate sector reflects the demographics of the broader South African society. By actively promoting the inclusion of Black women, organisations can work towards dismantling the systemic barriers that have historically marginalised them (Tootle, 2024).

Myeza and April (2021) argued that many talented African Black individuals may disengage from their leadership aspirations, believing that their race diminishes their chances of success. The internalisation of racial and gender stereotypes complicates the professional landscape for Black women leaders, leading to experiences of racial identity dissonance as they navigate predominantly white corporate environments. This dissonance can cause a disconnection from their cultural identity, further undermining their self-perception and potential as leaders.

Nonetheless, many African Black women leaders draw upon their unique experiences and cultural values, such as Ubuntu (a concept which emphasises community and shared humanity), to foster empathetic and inclusive work environments. While their backgrounds enable them to connect deeply with their teams, the ongoing struggle against ingrained stereotypes often leads to their leadership capabilities being underestimated. As they navigate their careers, these leaders not only seek personal advancement, but also feel a profound responsibility to uplift their communities and challenge the prevailing status quo, which can be both a motivating force and a heavy burden (Myeza & April, 2021).

Another factor that contributes to the slow progression into leadership roles for African Black females is the limited access to those informal network groups that are important and have served White male leaders in their progression. The issues with networking for African Black females are that: (1) there are not enough leaders in their social group with whom they can network and benefit from their shared gender status; and (2) they are not able to join White networks because they are too different from White women to share in their gender status. Therefore, African Black women find themselves in a situation where they do not belong anywhere, thereby limiting their access to important networks that would help their progression into leadership roles (Mehra et al., 1998; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). This further highlights that the plight of White female leaders is different to that of African Black females (Bell et al., 2003).

Research has found that in companies that have embraced gender diversity and increased their female representation in leadership positions, have seen significant improvements in their financial performance. This proves the business case for companies and highlights the benefits of having women representation in leadership roles, yet there is still a representation gap in many organisations globally (Catalyst, 2004a; Reinhold, 2005).

It can therefore be said that negative attitudes toward female leaders still exist, which impede the potential progression and levels of success of women. These negative attitudes are

multifaceted, manifesting in various forms such as unconscious biases, gender-based stereotypes, and preconceived notions about leadership capabilities. Such attitudes not only undermine the confidence and morale of aspiring female leaders, but also impact how their contributions and achievements are perceived within organisational contexts (Eagly et al., 1992; Heilman, 2001; Heilman et al., 2004).

In their meta-analysis, Eagly et al. (1992) investigated whether people tend to be biased against female leaders and managers. The results showed a tendency for people to evaluate female leaders less favourably than male leaders. Furthermore, Eagly and Carli (2007) found that for men, marriage and parenthood are associated with higher pay and higher social standing, whereas they are more punitive for women.

The challenges faced by females in corporate South Africa cannot only be attributed to male leadership practices and organisational culture; it is important to note that there are inherent systems and thought processes that promote patriarchy and male dominance in organisations. These systems are brought about by organisational structures that are breeding grounds for patriarchy, thereby excluding and isolating women who become subject to discrimination and unfair treatment. Feminist theories, despite their recognition of hierarchical organisations being important locations for male dominance, assume that organisational structures are gender neutral, yet they are not (Acker, 1990).

Acker (1990) posited that organisational structures, by their very nature, are male and masculine, and the hierarchical structures keep this true. Organisations are not gender neutral or asexual; they are gendered and reflect and reproduce male advantage. Their gendered nature tends to be hidden by what is entailed in the job. Positioning gender-neutral and disembodied organisations is part of a deep strategy to control industrial capitalist societies.

The contemporary organisational landscape has brought about a profound transformation, marked by a significant emphasis on power, material status, and rewards as the foundational elements of organisational structure. Unfortunately, this shift worsened gender disparities and women find themselves at a distinct disadvantage within these power-driven frameworks. The intersection of these structural dynamics and the global context of globalisation has further intensified the challenges faced by women in corporate environments. The impact of globalisation on organisational structures is worth noting. As businesses expand globally, the gendered nature of organisational frameworks is not confined to specific regions, but assumes a global dimension. The systems of disadvantage and discrimination that women encounter

within corporate structures are no longer isolated incidents but have become widespread on a global scale (Acker, 2004).

The empirical evidence presented by Hearn and Parkin (2007) shed light on the profound and disturbing impact of gendered organisational structures. Their research highlighted how these structures gave rise to enduring cycles of violations and emotional turmoil within various organisations. This, in turn, served to legitimise and perpetuate instances of violence and violation, creating a pervasive and deeply ingrained challenge that demands urgent attention.

According to the principle of causation, violence and violation are the 'effect' of the 'cause' of power dynamics brought about by patriarchy, which in its nature is discriminatory and oppressive. As male dominance continues in managerial positions, there are greater opportunities for males to exercise power in a negative and violating way. This power can also be exercised to silence complaints and ignore the emotions attached to those complaints (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1994).

The emotions attached to the aforesaid violations can be both positive and negative, depending on whether one is a recipient (likely feelings of anger, guilt and depression) or the sender (likely feelings of pleasure in winning, sadism and conquest). This manifestation of conflict and unresolved emotions results in organisational crisis, stress and unhealthy internal competition, causing employees to work against each other as opposed to together for the greater good of the organisation (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1994; Hearn & Parkin, 2007).

In response to these types of environments, women tend to be the recipients of constant stress, hurt and shame, which in turn creates behaviours of self-preservation. A typical example of self-preservation behaviour is the 'Queen Bee Syndrome' (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011), which is used to describe female leaders who, after reaching senior management positions, tend to alienate other women by working and operating in isolation of them, thereby preventing other women, especially junior women, from progressing into more senior roles. Johnson and Mathur-Helm (2011) claimed that African Black female leaders may be inclined to not support or assist other women because they seek their own recognition first, as opposed to being a representative for a particular group.

This inclination is typically brought about by fear and the threat of being outperformed by another female in a similar or lower position. This fear then tends to drive female leaders to be more interested in their own individual journeys as opposed to playing an agentic role and

uplifting others as they progress on their leadership journeys. This supports the perception that women are their own worst enemies, in that they are less likely to support and promote each other because of their paranoia and obsession with protecting their power base (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011; Sills, 2007).

According to a study conducted by Abalkhail (2020), other reasons why women display Queen Bee behaviours are competition, fear of weakness and family background. These reasons are categorised as: (1) Competition: women are aggressive towards females in lower positions to retain their power and remain unchallenged. This aggression is caused by the limited senior leadership opportunities available for females, which creates unhealthy and severe competition among women, more so than men; (2) Fear of weakness: as a result of their perceived weakness in the eyes of their male counterparts, women typically adopt characteristics of hypermasculinity and further alienate themselves from other women in order to retain power and remain unchallenged. This is more frequently the case when a female has to manage men; (3) Family background and connections: when women get their positions as a result of having family ties and social connections, their attitudes are superior to other women below them. These types of movements up the career ladder into leadership roles make it less likely that the female leader would be keen to participate and help a fellow female to develop and grow into leadership positions because they may feel threatened (Abalkhail, 2020; Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011).

In the context of South Africa, gender and leadership dynamics tend to be more complex given the history and cultural diversity of South Africa. The democratic South African government promulgated policies to increase participation in the overall economy for women, including the National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality as part of the bigger goal of implementing equal opportunity and affirmative action legislation (Mathur-Helm, 2005). An additional policy – the Gender Policy Framework (GPF) – was introduced in 1996, which aimed to ensure that:

1. women's rights are seen as human rights;
2. women have equality as citizens of South Africa;
3. they are given economic empowerment;
4. they are empowered and uplifted socially;
5. they are included in decision-making;
6. they are knowledgeable beneficiaries of all economic development imperatives; and

7. all affirmative action programmes aimed at developing women are implemented.

The above priorities were aimed at addressing the dynamics women faced as a result of societal, cultural, religious and economic discrimination in South Africa, yet the implementation of affirmative action programmes led to further complexities for African Black women because of the inherent inclination of corporate South Africa to be biased towards the White population. This meant that companies were transforming with the gender imperatives of increasing female representation, however those efforts only ended up increasing the population of White female leaders across the industries, leaving behind the African Black females (Booyesen, 1999; Mathur-Helm, 2005). The inherent make-up of leadership roles in an organisation is that of White males and they reported acceptance and preference for White women more than they did African Black women (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Mabokela, 2001).

An Apartheid-related characteristic that Booyesen (1999) referred to was “inequality within inequality”. They added that the issue of women lacking representation was deepened in corporate South Africa because the natural talent pool for management roles tends to be skewed towards White males. This is further complicated by the lack of female mentors and management trainers to support the growth and development journey of female leaders, thereby demonstrating that feminine values are undervalued and that White males’ values are overvalued.

Furthermore, Hills (2015) opined that there are specific factors that hold most South African women back, including a lack of education, domestic and cultural practices, a high unemployment rate, and disparities between the types of roles for women and men, the limited talent pool, and a lack of access to finance. These factors have created a system that reinforces the discrimination and isolation of women, especially African Black women (Booyesen, 1999; Hills, 2015; Mathur-Helm, 2005).

The below graphical presentation, Figure 4, summarises the relationship of these factors into four main themes: lack of education, domestic and cultural practices, limited talent pool (lack of skills), and lack of access to resources (Booyesen, 1999; Hills, 2015; Kambarami, 2006; Mathur-Helm, 2005; McDowell & Pringle, 1992).

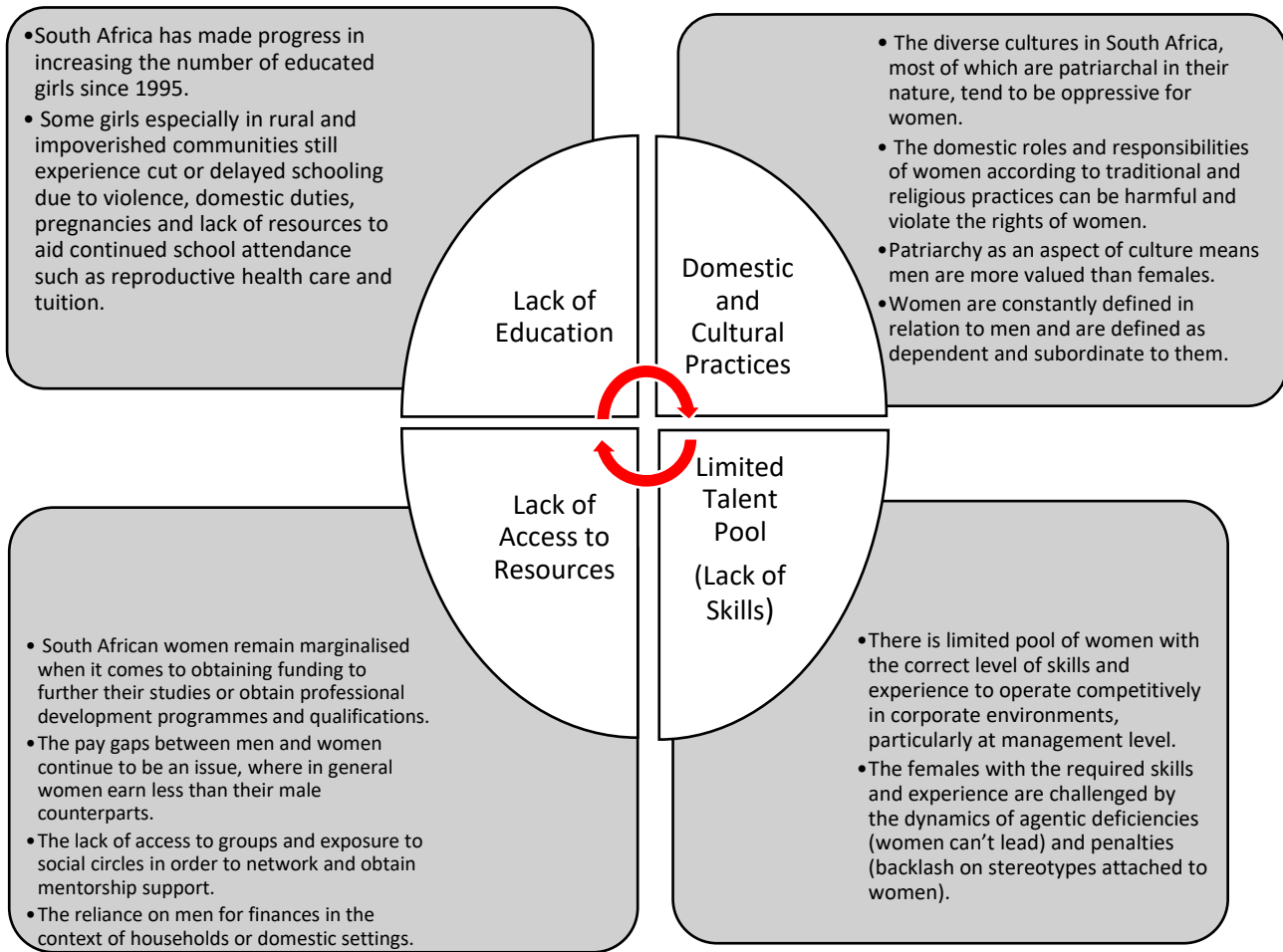


Figure 4. Summary of factors that are holding females back in South Africa

Source: Booysen, (1999); Hills (2015); Kambarami (2006); Mathur-Helm (2005); McDowell and Pringle (1992)

Ryan et al. (2011) provided a contextual variation of the ‘think manager, think female’ association. They stated that even though society tends to have views that are more biased towards male leadership, there is a change that is starting to grow from the advent of transformational leadership, where the traditionally feminine traits are becoming more acceptable with the increase of female leaders in organisations. They further expanded on the growth of women leaders in particular sectors such as healthcare, human resources and retail, which they attributed to an acceptance of the relationship-building characteristics that are associated with being female.

The crux of this contextual variation, however, is that the ‘think manager, think male’ association is mostly applied in situations of company successes as opposed to failures. In situations where organisations are failing or undergoing a crisis, then the association becomes

‘think manager, think female’. This is not only due to the backlash of managerial stereotypes that women face and not because there is a perception that they will improve the situation but is because women are perceived to be good people managers and will therefore easily take the blame for organisational failures (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010).

A phenomenon known as the ‘glass cliff’ refers to situations where women are more likely to be appointed to a leadership position in times of crisis or when the organisation is undergoing conditions of failure (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). This is similar to the ‘glass ceiling’, which refers to the invisible barriers that prevent women from progressing to leadership positions (Morrison et al., 1987). These metaphors are used as concepts to describe the challenges faced by women in leadership positions.

Haslam and Ryan (2008) advocated for an expansion of the theories on gender and managerial stereotypes within the context of an organisation’s performance and situational flexibility. They argued that situational flexibility, which is the ability to lead and drive outcomes based on the current situation as opposed to individual characteristics, can be associated with either males or females.

Recent studies on gender and leadership issues for Black women in South Africa have highlighted the challenges stemming from historical inequities and systemic barriers. Black women face a dual disadvantage of race and gender in leadership roles, with gender-based power dynamics and male-dominant norms hindering their upward mobility. These women often experience discrimination, stereotyping, and subtle biases in the workplace, which impact their career progression and leadership opportunities. The intersectionality of gender, race, and social class further complicates their experiences, emphasising the need for transformative leadership and inclusive practices to address these complex issues. Despite some progress, there is still a long way to go in achieving gender equality and empowering Black women in leadership positions in South Africa (Johnson & Thomas, 2012; Mashele & Alagidele, 2022; Mayer et al., 2018; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Ramnund-Mansingh, 2022; Roos, 2020).

2.3 Leadership and race dynamics

Early studies on leadership ignored the relationship between race and gender and how it influences leadership styles and journeys, as these theories were mostly created by White males who were not interested in such relationships and how they could shape research. Critical race theories claim that intractable racial categories are changeable because they have been proven

to be socially constructed throughout history (Ospina & Su, 2009; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) posits that racial categories, though seemingly intractable, are indeed changeable because they are socially constructed, a concept supported by many academic studies. This theory underscores the idea that race and racism are central, systemic features of society that go beyond individual prejudices, highlighting the role of social structures and cultural assumptions in upholding racial hierarchies. The origins of CRT in legal studies, with its focus on analysing the United States' persistent racial divide, provide a foundational understanding that race is not a biological fact, but rather a social construct designed to maintain power dynamics (Kumaran, 2023).

Race theories on leadership indicate that African Black people are perceived to be less effective leaders than White people –a phenomenon deeply rooted in systemic biases and stereotypes. Black leaders are also frequently perceived as being inadequate when compared to White leaders, highlighting a critical need to explore the impact of racial nuances on leadership perceptions (Beatty, 1973; Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

Studies have also shown that social variables are increasingly significant in rating the general occupational performance of Black leaders (Cox & Nkomo, 1986; Ford et al., 1985; Triana et al., 2013), yet White leaders do not have their performance rated in the same way, given the assumed normativeness of their leader prototypicality (Ford et al., 1985).

In instances of leadership performance ratings, Black leaders tend to be rated negatively and White leaders positively, affirming the stereotypical and societal positions for Black and White people respectively. Many White leaders believe that Black leaders are hired solely for the fulfilment of affirmative action quotas and that they are not qualified and are incompetent. As a result of this, Black leaders are not assigned senior roles, are not given any discretion to make decisions, and are excluded from networks that would support their learning and development (Knight et al., 2003).

Black leaders are less likely than their White counterparts to have success be attributed to their merit and effort, but rather to external factors. Similarly, in instances of failure, Black leaders are blamed for not making an effort or for not having the requisite abilities, without regard for external factors (Knight et al., 2003).

The negative rating of Black versus White leaders is applied in employment performance factors such as specialised abilities for certain roles, such as in technical environments (April & Sikatali, 2019) and abilities to drive groups toward their performance objectives (Adamson, 2017). This highlights that there are still racial biases that favour White leaders, and that being White is an attribute of the business leader prototype, regardless of an organisation's racial composition (Beatty, 1973; Cox & Nkomo, 1986; Rosette et al., 2008).

Additionally, studies indicate that African Black people are subjected to various microaggressions in the workplace. These are brief verbal behavioural embarrassments that may or may not be intentional, but which communicate negative racial slurs and insults towards Black people. Racial microaggressions need not be human encounters only, but can also be environmental. Certain spaces, whether physical or virtual, can contribute to a toxic environment that perpetuates racial biases and fosters an atmosphere of exclusion. From institutional structures and public spaces to media representations and online platforms, the environment constantly influences and shapes people's perceptions. An example of an environmental microaggression is an office environment that is not inclusive or ignores a person's racial identity through paintings or displaying symbols that are exclusive to a particular group. Perpetrators of these microaggressions are often not aware that they are engaging in this manner (Gordon & Johnson, 2003; Sue et al., 2007).

Research has highlighted three forms of microaggressions: (1) microassaults, which are direct, derogatory insulting slurs that can be verbal or non-verbal, avoidant behaviour and/or purposeful discrimination, which are intended to harm or insult a Black person; these are often conscious acts by the perpetrator; (2) microinsults, which include verbal remarks and comments that are rude, convey messages of insensitivity, and are demeaning to a person's racial identity; these are often unconscious acts by the perpetrator; and (3) microinvalidations, which are often unconscious acts by the perpetrator, such as comments and behaviours that exclude or negate a Black person's thoughts, feelings and experiences of their reality.

Generally speaking, Black leaders do not overtly experience microinsults and microinvalidations as it would be inappropriate in a work environment and invite a disciplinary process against the perpetrator. If used, these are usually done in private to give the perpetrator some anonymity (Sue et al., 2007).

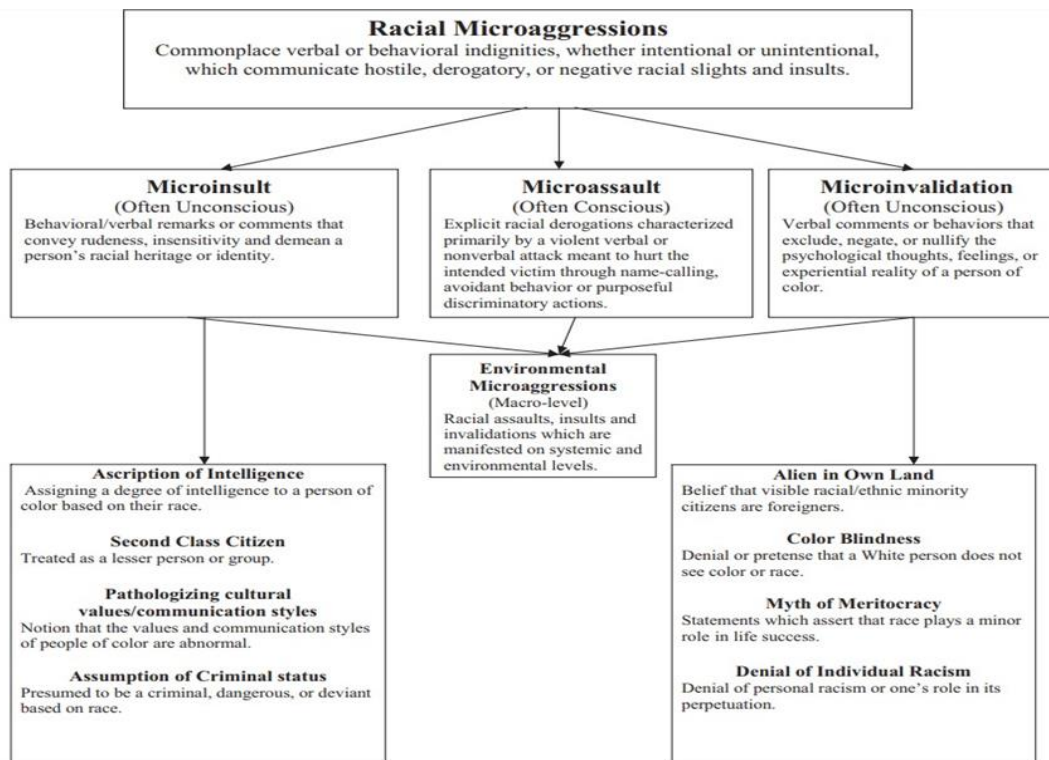


Figure 5. Categories and relationships among racial microaggressions

Source: Sue et al. (2007, p.278)

Figure 5 above demonstrates how the three categories of microaggressions relate to each other and their impact on the psychology of Black people. This highlights the dilemma that Black leaders face when dealing with race dynamics in the workplace.

In their study, Glass and Cook (2008) assessed how appointing Black leaders affected a company's share price in comparison to the appointment of White leaders for 10 days following an announcement. They found that when Black leaders were appointed to leadership positions the share price dropped significantly, in comparison to when a White leader was appointed. The market also assesses Black leaders who are appointed from outside more positively than those who are promoted from within. However, when the leadership ranks were distinguished between the Black leaders, investors reacted more negatively to executive appointments from outside as opposed to those promoted within, particularly for the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) role. This highlights the growth gap for Black professionals, as well as the opportunities that can be leveraged, given the preference for internal promotions to fulfil roles such as that of a CEO (Gligor et al., 2021).

For female leaders, some researchers argued that the display of agentic behaviours, such as dominance, can produce a backlash as this behaviour is not associated with the prescribed behaviours for females (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau 2002; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012). This theory was, however, proven to be incomplete given the participants were White women and therefore only makes reference to gender stereotypes from the point of view of White women. By evaluating African Black female leaders, the agentic backlash created by White female leaders when they show dominance was not created by African Black female and White male leaders (Livingston et al., 2012).

Rosette and Livingston (2012) reported that African Black female leaders suffer the double jeopardy brought on by their race and gender and are evaluated more negatively than African Black men and White women, especially under conditions of organisational failures. When African Black females, White females, African Black males and White males were evaluated comparatively under conditions of company successes, African Black males, White females and African Black females were evaluated as the least favourable to White men. Even though all three groups were evaluated less favourably to White men, African Black women ranked the lowest.

Schein et al.'s (1996) research showed that male managers were more likely to possess all the characteristics that are associated with leadership success than females. This supported the stereotypical association that when society thinks of a manager, they think of a male. When one juxtaposes the findings of Rosette and Livingston (2012) to those of Schein et al. (1996), it can be inferred that the stereotypical associations for African Black females under conditions of organisational failures are 'think manager, think African Black female leaders'.

The structural challenges and difficulties women face when trying to advance in their careers include sexism, discrimination and exclusion. The complexity with African Black women, however, is the added dimension of race. Black female leaders face the dilemma which has been termed 'double jeopardy' because of their gender and race (Beckwith et al., 2016; Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

This systemic bias not only affects individual career trajectories, but also perpetuates the underrepresentation of African Black female leaders in various industries. One key factor that contributes to their negative performance evaluations lies in the inherent biases and stereotypes that persist in society. These biases often undervalue the leadership skills, intellectual capabilities, and decision-making abilities of African Black women in comparison to their male

counterparts. Consequently, the accomplishments and contributions of African Black female leaders may be overlooked or downplayed, leading to unjust evaluations and limited professional opportunities (Bell & Nkomo, 1992; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

The lack of diverse representation within organisations exacerbates this problem. When decision-makers and evaluators predominantly belong to specific racial and gender demographics, they may lack the necessary understanding and cultural competence to accurately assess the performance of African Black female leaders. As a result, these leaders face additional scrutiny, biased judgment, and unfair expectations that hinder their career progression (Beckwith et al., 2016; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

In the case of South Africa, it is clear that the definition of race and non-racialism in the context of the Apartheid era is still not well understood. Anciano-White and Selemani (2012), who studied many prominent political, religious and corporate women leaders, found that race is not biological or physical, but rather a social construct that can be “ascended”. They claimed that non-racialism is a reactive product of the previous Apartheid dispensation in South Africa, challenging the hegemonic White and masculine orientations that were embedded within the doctrine. This left the country with no real clarity or guidance on how to realise a non-racial South African society, and subsequently, non-racial workplaces (Anciano-White & Selemani, 2012; April & Josias, 2017; Simpson, 2012).

White people were given preferential treatment and allocated leadership jobs because of Apartheid, which shaped the very nature of how institutionalised racism is currently playing out and still affecting the representation of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa (Booyesen, 1999). The introduction of affirmative action was intended to foster opportunities and create an even playing field for all racial groups, yet the shift resulted in more White women being appointed to leadership positions and African Black women remaining in the lower levels of more service and production-orientated roles rather than the technical and managerial jobs that White women took on (Booyesen, 1999; Mathur-Helm, 2005).

According to Bell et al. (2003), leadership and race in South African workplaces is a delicate subject that has not been investigated broadly enough. The authors argued that for White females, conversations about race are generally left for African Black females to manage, while conversations about gender are shared.

Additional studies have claimed that the racial and gender intersectionality for African Black women has a negative impact on their growth and development in the workplace, as well as in the way they consume knowledge. Traditional knowledge-sharing channels may not always be inclusive or accessible to individuals with diverse experiences and identities, while stereotypes and biases can influence the recognition of African Black women's contributions, resulting in their voices being marginalised or ignored (Holvino, 2010; Lewis, 2023; Roos, 2020).

African Black women find themselves needing to act defiantly in order to obtain information or knowledge from their white counterparts, because they typically experience that information does not come easily and they are usually excluded from circles of knowledge sharing. This defiance sparks a reaction of defence and concern from White leaders about the perceived aggression. This suggests that leadership development programmes need to be delivered in a way that does not leave any group, especially the African female group, feeling aggrieved by a lack of information or difficulty obtaining it (Lewis, 2023).

The exclusion of African Black women is further exacerbated by prevailing cultural norms and power dynamics that limit their upward mobility. White females are able to focus on gender as a source of identity when dealing with issues of a lack of progression, yet African Black females need to focus on the multiple subordinates they carry as sources of identity and how these play a role in their exclusion (Bell et al., 2003; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). These multifaceted aspects play a significant role in shaping their experiences, perspectives, and opportunities in society. Race and gender interact in complex ways, influencing various aspects of an individual's life. The intersectionality of these two concepts goes beyond simple categorisations; it encompasses the lived experiences and struggles that African Black females encounter daily (Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Research has demonstrated that the traditional (White) masculine and (White) feminine leadership approaches are no longer relevant in today's diverse and dynamic world. In the past, leadership was often associated with qualities like dominance, assertiveness, and harsh individualism, which were typically attributed to the White Masculine leadership model. Similarly, the White feminine leadership model was characterised by traits such as nurturing, collaboration, and submissiveness (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996).

2.4 African Black women's intersectional complexities

The intersectionality theory, originating from Black feminist thought, posits that various forms of privilege and disadvantage, such as race, class, and gender, interact to create a compound

impact that exceeds their individual effects. It emphasises the simultaneous nature of multiple social categories like gender and race, leading to complex inequalities that go beyond analysing each category in isolation (Carastathis, 2014; Castro & Holvino, 2016; Florian, 2018; Moorosi et al., 2018).

Crenshaw (1989) highlighted the importance of considering intersecting oppressions, as seen in legal cases where Black women faced discrimination that existing laws failed to address. Intersectionality theory has gained recognition for shedding light on the interlocking nature of racism, sexism, and other social identities, influencing feminist discourse and human rights discussions globally. Intersectionality, originally developed within legal studies, is a vital theoretical framework aimed at addressing the intricate dynamics of oppression, particularly evident among Black women in the United States. It underscores the significance of taking into account diverse facets of identity – such as race, gender, class, and more – to comprehend how systemic inequities and power structures intersect, leading to different impacts on individuals and communities.

Rather than focusing solely on individual dimensions of inequality like race or gender, the intersectionality theory emphasises the need to analyse the intersections of various identity markers and disadvantages to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of oppression. The premise of the intersectionality theory is that people live with multiple, layered identities that are derived from social relations, history and the operations of structured power. In studies of Black women from the 1990s it was revealed that gender, race and class cannot be seen as separate systems of discrimination and oppression, as they all mutually construct on one another, i.e., one tends not to exist without the other (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989; Tinner et al., 2023).

It is therefore important that African Black women are not assessed with a single lens of each social construct, but need to be assessed with all constructs considered. This is a dilemma that affects current leadership practices in corporate structures across the globe (Richardson & Loubier, 2008; Rosette et al., 2016). Rosette and Livingston (2012) argued that African Black females tend to have a ‘double jeopardy’ scenario when their leadership is evaluated against the organisation’s performance. When the organisation performs negatively, the leadership assumptions that women are bad leaders tend to work against them, which the authors referred to as the inferential-based process of identity. The second scenario comes from the assumptions

that African Black women are not typical leaders, which they referred to as the recognition-based process of identity that African Black women face.

The irony with both these subordinate identities is that they are associated with what is deemed to be atypical leadership characteristics and therefore make poor performance or failure another simultaneous process of identity for African Black women (Richardson & Loubier, 2008; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Rosette et al., 2016; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Research further revealed that in instances where an African Black woman was successful, their two subordinate identities would not result in double jeopardy. This rather made them more comparable with other groups with a single subordinate identity, such as White women and African Black men. This comparison, however, does not mean they are equally comparable with White males, because the inherent perception of White males is that their race and gender are generally accepted and associated with success, i.e., their race and gender bestow an additive effect on the already existing benefits they have for being White and male (Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

Intersectionality for African Black women tends to be even more complex as they have multiple subordinate identities, such as their ethnic identity, and self-concepts, such as their accents, religious beliefs, taste in food and hairstyles. These give African Black women additional identities that are separate from those that are dominant in society (race, gender and class) (Curtis, 2017).

Researchers have opposing views about multiple subordinate identities, however. Some have argued that individuals with single subordinate identities are the ones who suffer the most discrimination and oppression, because they are the embodiment of their social group. Others, meanwhile, claim that individuals with more than one subordinate identity are far more oppressed and discriminated against (Richardson & Loubier, 2008; Rosette et al., 2016). These opposing views from the same theories can be confusing, therefore it is important that the context in which individuals with multiple identities are assessed is considered. An example is when African Black women leaders do not suffer the agentic backlash that White women suffer in positions of leadership, however African Black women are assessed more harshly and negatively than White women; making mistakes and failures has more dire consequences for them than it does for White females (Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

While studies have demonstrated that for Black females in particular, their multiple subordinate identities play a significant role in perpetuating systems of oppression and discrimination, research has proven that these multiple subordinate identities have also played a fundamental role in shaping the resilience and courage of African Black females to participate in the workplace, despite the challenges of facing systems of disadvantage that continue to be present only for their group (Cox & Nkomo, 1986; Curtis, 2017; Holvino, 2010; Rosette et al., 2016; Rosette & Livingston, 2012). In a study by Jean-Marie et al. (2009), the experiences of African Black female educational leaders were highlighted to examine the intersections of race and gender. The study found similar themes of hardship experienced by these women growing up, particularly given the challenges of racial segregation and systems, which placed many African Black families in communities where survival was a challenge.

In their study, Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) identified the factors associated with gender evaluations and the stereotypes faced by women, especially African Black women. They encouraged a shift away from thinking in autonomous categories of analysis to challenge individuals to examine what it means to have marginalised status within a marginalised group. This social psychological research on ideologies and identity has allowed researchers to better predict who is defined as an intersectional subordinate and with what consequences for leadership.

Morgan (2020) adopted a structural feminist methodological approach in their research, which aimed to create a more inclusive debate, deconstruct the ideas surrounding homogenous leadership, and contribute to increasing theory. Morgan posited that this approach not only challenged the concept of homogenous White female leaders, but it also sought to bring balance to gender leadership discussions so they include the perspectives, experiences and voices of African Black female leaders themselves. This was achieved by studying the lived experiences of African Black women leaders in the UK, and subsequently uncovered real-life examples of how African Black women leaders have to work and thrive to succeed in a male-dominated bi-cultural world (Bell & Nkomo, 1992).

In their exploration of the implications of Multisource Feedback (MSF), Kea-Edwards et al. (2023) investigated the dynamics of performance evaluation methods, shedding light on their potential disadvantages for African Black women, particularly in the intersection of race and gender. Multisource Feedback, commonly referred to as 360-degree feedback, is a performance evaluation process that involves soliciting feedback from various sources, including

subordinates, peers, and supervisors, to provide a holistic assessment of an individual's leadership capabilities. The study posited that, rather than serving as an impartial and equitable evaluation tool, MSF can inadvertently work against African Black women due to the complex interplay of race and gender biases. The feedback obtained from multiple sources may be influenced by ingrained stereotypes, unconscious biases, or preconceived notions that disproportionately impact African Black women, perpetuating existing disparities. This type of evaluation has proven to work in creating high-performance teams and organisations with high levels of communication and alignment on goals. Yet this does not serve the same purpose for African Black women, as they find that they are often evaluated negatively because of gender and racial biases in the workplace. African Black female leaders have, however, used this feedback as a tool to navigate through the biases they face on a day-to-day basis.

Furthermore, discrimination against African Black female leaders presents psychological safety issues for women in the workplace. This lack of safety presents itself in talented African Black females leaving the workplace to focus on their families or personal projects. Clark (2020) defined psychological safety as the process of human interactions that base progression on natural human needs, such as challenge, inclusion, learning and contributing. Organisations can benefit greatly by taking care of these four areas to create psychological safety for all employees, which would also address the intersectional issues experienced by African Black female leaders. Organisations can create psychologically safe cultures when workers from all backgrounds have authentic support from their peers and supervisors; they need to feel trusted, empowered, respected and visible for their expertise and contributions. That way, they too are encouraged to form part of the goals of high performance.

It is therefore important that organisations take issues of intersectionality for African Black female leaders more seriously so as to not incur losses from training staff who end up leaving and creating a risk of knowledge vacuums in their business environments. There is optimal value to be gained from having diverse teams in a working environment (Burrell, 2022).

Holvino (2010) further argued that if the plight of African Black female leaders is to be improved, there needs to be a reevaluation of the conceptualisation of race, gender and class as simultaneous processes of identity in social and institutional practices. It is therefore important to redefine the meaning and practices of identity to address them holistically for the benefit of those who are oppressed by them.

Despite all of the above, many African Black women leaders build resilience and adopt strategies and coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges brought on by the various systems of discrimination. They construct their successes according to their gender, race, experiences, family history and culture, and make a conscious effort to practice inclusive, fair and socially just leadership styles (Curtis, 2017; Moorosi et al., 2018; Morgan, 2020).

Research in South Africa that has employed an intersectional lens, most of which was published in the last five years, has covered a broad spectrum of issues, including the construction of gay masculinities, leadership development programmes, non-communicable diseases among youth, energy poverty, media stereotypes, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), executive management, social determinants of health, and the experiences of the LGBT community within the Indian sub-culture (De Jong et al., 2021; Joseph, 2023; Lewis, 2023; Lin & Okyere, 2023; Maake, 2023; Mathur-Helm, 2005; Mukoma et al., 2023; Nguse, 2023; Pillay, 2022). While these studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of the complex interplay of race, gender, class, and other social categories in various domains, limitations have been identified. One such limitation is the lack of a comprehensive analysis on how intersecting identities affect individuals' experiences in leadership development programmes, which has led to calls for further exploration (Lewis, 2023). Another significant limitation is the fact that existing studies predominantly relate to African Black women in other countries, with only a small representation in the South African context. This paints a bleak picture for African Black female leaders in South Africa, as it means leadership practitioners and organisational leaders may also have no knowledge and capability to apply the intersectionality lens holistically when assessing groups with multiple subordinate identities (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010), which will exacerbate the unfair circumstances in society and the workplace. It is therefore important to recognise and challenge these theories as they do not fully represent African Black females in South Africa. Further studies will enable opportunities for career development and advancement, increase the visibility of female leadership talent, and assist with combating conditions of biases and discrimination (Bell et al., 2003; Cox & Nkomo, 1986).

Furthermore, African Black female leaders in South Africa are held back by the dynamics depicted in Table 5, i.e., a lack of education, domestic and cultural practices, a lack of skills brought about by inadequate career development opportunities, and a lack of access to resources (health and finance). These dynamics play a role in adding to the multiple subordinate identities that Black women face around the world (Rosette et al., 2016; Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

A failure to create awareness and apply interventions to deal with the challenges and systems of oppression and discrimination faced by African Black women (over and above their gender and race), will further exclude them from leadership roles and emerging technological enhancement in corporate environments, compromising their eligibility for managerial positions and widening the gap of underrepresentation in leadership roles (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021; Ramohai, 2019).

The intersectionality theory can thus be used as a tool to examine leadership because it highlights the connections between multiple identities and personalities of social actors. It can also facilitate the analysis of complex social situations without reducing them to single categories (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). It is for these reasons that this researcher sought to update and expand on the insights into intersectional experiences for African Black women in leadership positions in South Africa; add to the existing body of work on holistic solutions that fully incorporate the African Black female's perspective; and contribute towards addressing the broader structural and systemic factors that exist due to the legacy of Apartheid.

2.5 Leadership and class dynamics

Class has been defined in various ways as it is a complex concept. Crompton (1993) defined class as people sharing similar market or economic situations, arguing that it is a concept used in sociology to explain differing life chances. A study by Gross (1953), meanwhile, noted that class is a psychological phenomenon that is based on values and attitudes related to economic aspects of one's social life. In a more recent study by Kraus et al. (2011), the authors stated that there is more to social class than just material conditions, explaining that it influences cultural practices and behaviour. They further opined that perceptions of social class rank influence patterns of understanding, emotional responses and behaviour. They further highlighted that things such as music preferences, manners and customs are characteristics of social class over and above the observable symbols of wealth, education and occupation.

Figure 6 illustrates how social class and its perceived signals are ranked according to psychological and behavioural outcomes among lower- and upper-class individuals.

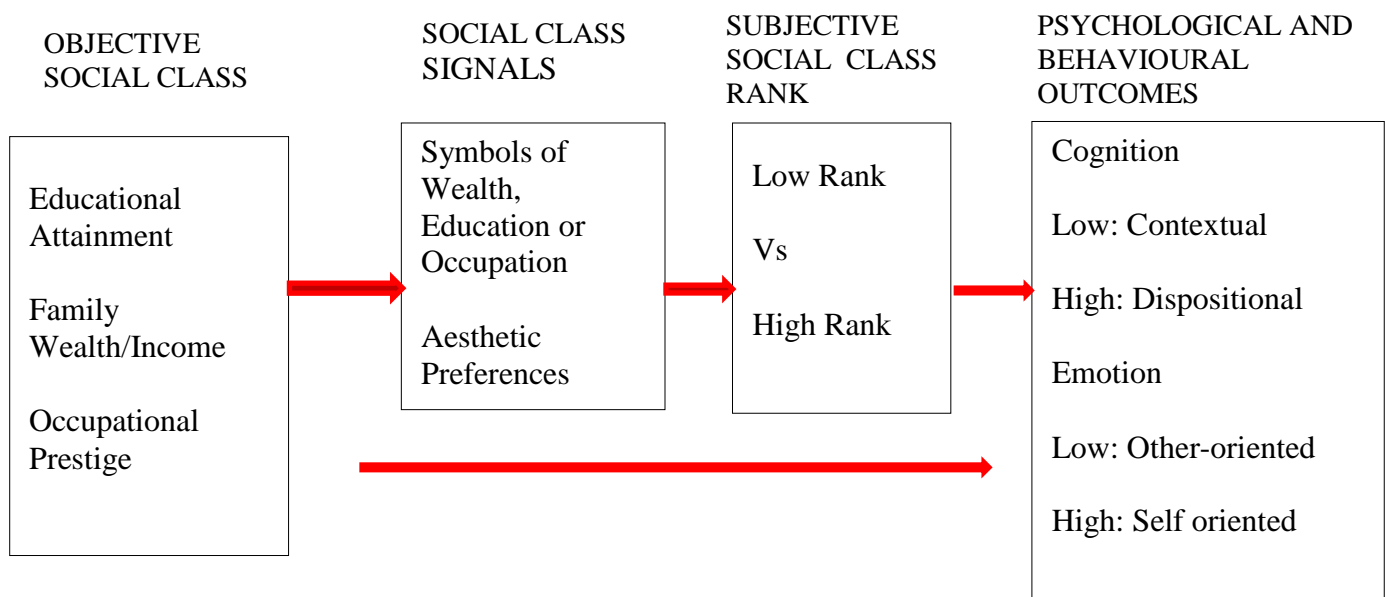


Figure 6. The social class complex

Source: Kraus et al. (2011, p.247)

In the case of African Black females, the additional subordinate of class gives them a “different standpoint” because they are not White (race), they are not male (gender), and they also do not come from economically privileged backgrounds. This means that, for African Black females, class becomes an additional simultaneous process of identity, the same way gender and race do (Holvino, 2010).

Over and above this, theories have demonstrated how the factors that contribute to social class (educational attainment, family income and occupation prestige) are what are holding Black females back from moving up the ranks in organisations. This is an even bigger issue for African Black females in South Africa, given its historical context and socioeconomic climate (Booyesen, 1999; Hills, 2015; Kambarami, 2006; Mathur-Helm, 2005; McDowell & Pringle, 1992).

The intersectionality theory also suggests that the simultaneous processes of identity, such as race, gender and class, create unique experiences of discrimination and disadvantage for Black women, which may have implications for their mental health. This intersection of multiple identities, where a group experiences compounded discrimination and disadvantage, is what some researchers have termed ‘triple jeopardy’ (Rosenfield, 2012; Veenstra, 2011). This “different standpoint” that Holvino (2010) referred to highlights the challenging position in

which African Black females find themselves as a group, including how it creates a specific way in which knowledge is consumed and produced by them. Black

Holvino (2010) added that being a woman is not a universal experience or category in the workplace, therefore it is important for organisations to open themselves up to creating dialogues for analysis across the various categories and experiences of 'women'. This will create a better understanding of the complexities attached to the simultaneity of race, gender and class for some groups, and how these perpetuate power and material advantage for some groups.

African Black females know and understand the inherent oppression that comes with the unique position they occupy in society, which encourages resilience. The class category for African Black women further demonstrates the difference in the needs of White females versus those of African Black females. In the context of work, while White females were fighting for the opportunity to work instead of staying home and being taken care of by their husbands, African Black women have always had to work, with their historical working role being a domestic worker with poor working conditions (Collins, 1998; Hurtado, 1996). African Black women's fight was about improving their working conditions, as the privilege of staying at home was an option only for White females (Glenn, 2001; Romero, 2016).

In addition, White women were able to participate more holistically in corporate structures, similar to their male counterparts, because they would typically have had African Black females playing the role of maids and taking care of their homes and family requirements while they went to work. This was a class privilege that came with being a White female with close associations and relationships with White males (Romero, 2016).

The class gap for African Black women thus formed a labour relations system that was birthed by the Apartheid regime. When they were able to participate in corporate environments, African Black females were traditionally given more production and service-driven roles, and were discriminated against moving into any technical or managerial roles (Booyesen, 1999; Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010).

Furthermore, social class can affect social affiliations in same-class and cross-class interactions, as individuals are more likely to gravitate to, and associate themselves with, those from similar social classes and backgrounds. The degree of affiliation also differs by social class attribute, therefore even in what may be deemed as 'equal' participation in the workplace

for all women, the association with White men benefited White women more than it did African Black females and males. When opportunities for promotion came about, the likely candidates to be moved up would be White women as a result of their social affiliations (Côté et al., 2017).

The South African government has worked to address these class dynamics, which were largely brought about by Apartheid, including the inherent psychological impacts on various groups in society. The regulations introduced since 1994 to address the inequalities of the Apartheid regime were instituted to: (1) drive corporate social responsibility to increase economic activity participation for the groups that were previously disadvantaged in the Apartheid era; and (2) lessen the class gaps (such as poverty) that the system of oppression brought into South Africa's very diverse society. The success of these regulations is that they have increased the middle-class population in the country, thereby giving more people access to economic participation, financial instruments, and education (Arya & Bassi, 2011).

This increase in the middle-class population has given rise to further discrimination against groups that fall under the middle-class population in South Africa. Krige (2012) highlighted the dynamic where middle-class African Black consumers are identified as inconspicuous consumers, which suggests that they do not purchase a product for its use only, but for the display of wealth and purchasing power, i.e., price is the only significant factor in that purchase. This classification of African Black consumers highlights how the definition of middle class has now been racialised in South Africa.

The concept of racialisation within the middle class has sparked robust debates among African Black individuals, particularly as they assert that this categorisation is neither static nor permanent. In the eyes of African Black people, the classification of middle class is perceived as a mutable status that can easily shift over time. This viewpoint stands in contrast to the White population, where the middle-class identification is often perceived as more stable. Consequently, African Black individuals, and particularly African Black females, argue that this categorisation imposes an unfair and potentially limiting label on their social and economic identity (Khunou, 2014).

The history of South Africa with the nuances of Apartheid makes class an even more complex element for African Black females, because their class experiences were greatly influenced by their background and where they came from, and not so much their permanent state of being in an economy (which is a position enjoyed by the White population group). By its nature,

Apartheid decided how communities would be grouped and engineered the spaces to be occupied by Black population groups (Arya & Bassi, 2011; Ellis, 2019).

Therefore, as an African Black female professional, getting a job and moving into the suburbs or moving from rural areas into townships does not automatically eradicate your background and the historical pressures of needing to look after those you have left behind. The natural sequence of moving up means you are likely to spend more to better the lives of your family and work on improving your home's physical appearance (a phenomenon known as the 'Black Tax'). This very act of spending is known as 'conspicuous consumption' by those who have very little understanding of how class is experienced by other groups. It can therefore be said that class dynamics for African Black females are heterogeneous and complex; they require a lens that broadens the understanding of how complex race-aligned socioeconomic class is for this population group (Khunou, 2014; Krige, 2012; Oppel, 2023).

2.6 Experiences of African Black female leaders

Crenshaw (1989), Curtis (2017) and Lawton et al. (2015) found that existing research on the experiences of African Black female leaders place African Black women in the same category as White women, without any further consideration of the multiple subordinates they possess when compared to other groups. While White women in South Africa formed part of the privileged race and class, they also tended to carry gender stereotype issues and have challenges with issues about gender. When analysing African Black female leaders in South Africa, it is important to consider that "...the interstices of complex subordinate positions on dimensions of race, gender and class—create the conditions of possibility for a 'different standpoint' for women of colour" (Holvino, 2010, p.250).

Bell et al. (2003) captured the fundamental differences in the experiences between these two groups and how their interests and causes differ fundamentally, including from a historical point of view. Their research outlined why the two groups find it difficult to be allies; for White women, the issue of race tends to be something they defer to African Black women, even if they hold a view. On the other hand, African Black Women deal with race and gender effects in their daily lives and they therefore have to have a standpoint on both, as opposed to the White women who would typically only have a stand point on gender. If the two groups were to ever be allies, it would be imperative for both parties to acknowledge the privileged standpoint of the White female group versus the resentment of the African Black female group which stems from oppression.

African Black females are also exposed to cultural racism, i.e., individual and institutionalised expressions that perpetuate the view of one group’s culture as superior to the other. This is the root cause of institutionalised racism, as the individuals from the superior group seek to demonstrate and live by that complex in all environments in which they interact, especially in the workplace. This is usually historical and entrenched in a person’s upbringing, thereby making them blind to actions that are racist to other groups. This perpetuates the systems of discrimination and oppression against African Black females because the perceived superior groups tend to gravitate towards and influence each other (Sue, 2005).

Another challenge that African Black female leaders experience is when they request appreciation from their subordinates and do not get it. This results in a fortifying cycle of illegitimacy. Since subordinates tend not to have high regard for them and question their legitimacy in higher positions, their authority is always in question when viewed in relation to men in similar positions (Vial et al., 2016).

The most common reports of interpersonal interactions with oppression for African Black women can be summarised into four major themes: stereotyping, microaggressions, racialised and gendered self-presentation expectations, and voicing and silencing. These have also been found to influence each other in some women’s narration of their experiences. These four themes are discussed and summarised in Table 5 below (Holder et al., 2015; Holvino, 2010; Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Table 5. Summary of experiences of interpersonal oppression of African Black female leaders

Experience	Description
Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The stereotyping that Black women are always angry, confrontational, talk loudly and are difficult to work with. A stereotype that emanates from being misunderstood by white peers who have little knowledge and reference of Black leadership, given the assumption that leaders are typically white. • The second stereotype is that of mother “mama” where there are expectations of mothering and disciplinarian. This stems from the typical character of a mother who scolds you for doing wrong and takes care of you in times of need (nurturing). This applies to both Black and white female leaders. When this stereotype is rejected by a Black woman, then the angry, confrontational and difficult-to-work-with attachment takes place. • The third stereotype is “Jezebel”; the historical perceptions of Black women that translate to sexual objectification.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fourth stereotype is that of being educated and intelligent. The intention may be to compliment, but this is usually expressed as a microaggression (being described as well-spoken and different to “other” Black women) with names such as, “intelligent Blacks” and “educated girls”. This is connected to social class norms.
Microaggressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of exaggerated slang words by White peers is usually connected to negative stereotypes about Black women and Black culture. • The questioning and challenging of a Black female leader's authority and decision-making. This makes a mockery of the leadership role and responsibilities bestowed upon the Black female leaders. An example of this is when White peers or subordinates blatantly ignore instructions and immediately seek verification from a White counterpart.
Racialised and gendered self-presentation expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pressure to conform to white standards and culture when it comes to how Black female leaders should express themselves, their behaviours around others or in public, and the way they present themselves physically. Reference is made to the expectation to have women dress up “more professionally” and wear their hair more “neatly” without putting the same expectations on men. These expectations suppress the self-expression of Black women.
Voicing and silencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The oppressive and interruptive nature of interactions with peers when voicing an opinion. Speaking up in situations of conflict means negotiating your tone and approach to avert the stereotype of being confrontational and loud. • Being silenced, dismissed and ignored in group conversations that require individuals to contribute.

African Black females have been found to have a common understanding and appreciation of their experiences as part of a larger historical context. They present common characteristics of resilience and being driven by factors beyond discrimination, such as their cultural beliefs, their strong sense of commitment to social justice, and caring for people as leaders. Even though they share similar experiences of discrimination and exclusion, their responses are non-monolithic (Moorosi et al., 2018; Phendla, 2004; Reed, 2012).

Collins (2000) theorised that the African Black female leadership principles were developed as a strategic tool to deal with the systems of oppression and exclusion that African Black women faced, which continued as a method to build resilience and resistance. The two key areas from which these emerged were: (1) the social make-up of their families and communities; and

(2) women-centred networks and motherhood. An example of the former is the case of families whose husbands migrated to the cities for employment opportunities. The women would be left to run and manage their households, find ways to put food on the table, and raise the children on their own. The second element – women-centred networks and mothering – is where they formed support networks and structures around child care and standing in for each other in the absence of their husbands and partners (Collins, 2000; Giesen, 1995; Johnson, 2017).

In the case of South African Black women, therefore, their roles were minimised to just be that of caretakers of households and children, a process which has been termed “de-labourisation”. Their husbands and partners needed to move across the country to go work in the mines, thereby leaving them at home with their children. This would happen for lengthy periods in a year. Large groups of African Black women found themselves living alone in communities (rural and townships) to fend for their young and put food on the table. The extent of this was documented by Romano and Papastefanaki (2020), who posited that in South Africa, out of 10,000 miners, only 5% would be females, who mostly carried out administrative and service work. The remaining 95% of this population would typically represent men who had left their families, leaving the females isolated, poor, and needing to form their own networks to support themselves and raise their children. Many of these women ended up cleaning, cooking and looking after White women’s households to be able to purchase food, however they were constantly stretched to make ends meet. This subjected them to consumer racism because their buying power could not be matched to that of White women and men. This further highlights how their gender and race affected their income, as they were forced to live as single mothers; their efforts and contribution to the labour market were ignored as labour was defined by its direct contribution to the bottom line. Women’s work and contributions were deemed as non-value producing, hence the term ‘de-labourisation’ was coined to help demonstrate how the contribution of women to the mining industry was ignored (Collins, 2000; Giesen, 2005; Romano & Papastefanaki, 2020).

African Black females’ constructions of success are strongly shaped by their gender and race, and are deeply rooted in their cultural and family histories. This has shaped their leadership style, approach, and choice of career. African Black female leaders have been proven to have leadership styles that are holistic, inclusive and nurturing; they possess a deep sense of fulfilling a purpose that will change and improve the living conditions of those who are less fortunate because they resonate with those conditions, given their backgrounds and childhood experiences (Moorosi et al., 2018).

Given the aggressive employment equity laws imposed by the South African government, some African Black women have senior executive positions in private and non-profit organisations. However, because these are often without real decision-making authority, or they are placed ahead of White colleagues, they find themselves in a legitimacy conundrum of empowered powerlessness (Vassilopoulou et al., 2016). This apparent illegitimacy often leads to confusion among colleagues and subordinates, organisational disobedience by followers in certain instances, as well as negative subordinate conduct (Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Vial et al., 2016).

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

No single research methodology can be applied to all research problems, as each has its own relative strengths and weaknesses (Schulze, 2003). In this section, the researcher's logic for using a qualitative research method – hermeneutic phenomenology – is discussed.

3.2 Qualitative research methodology

Various sociology analysts have expounded thoroughly on the epistemological underpinnings of research (Baert, 1998; Burrell & Morgan, 2000; Creswell, 1994; Denzin et al., 2006; de Vos, 1998). At present, the two most common ways to conduct research are the qualitative method and the quantitative method.

Quantitative research accepts widespread suggestions and speculations as a point of take-off, while qualitative research expects to comprehend the phenomena inside a specific setting – in the case of this research, the experiences of African Black female leaders. Qualitative and quantitative researchers have various ways of dealing with inquiries concerning ontology (the nature of the real world and human conduct) and epistemology (the relationship of the researchers to the real world and the strategies and systems they will utilise to acquire information) (de Vos, 1998).

The differences between qualitative and quantitative research are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Comparative summary of qualitative and quantitative research approaches

Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses an inductive type of thinking; creates ideas, bits of knowledge and comprehension from examples in the information • Uses an emic point of view of request; gets significance from the subject's viewpoint • Is idiographic; intends to comprehend the implications that individuals append to regular day-to-day existence • Regards reality as emotional • Captures and finds meaning once the analyst progresses towards becoming submerged in the information • Concepts are subjects, themes and classifications. • Seeks to get wonders • Observations are dictated by data wealth of settings, and the kinds of perceptions utilised are changed to improve understanding • Data are introduced as words and citations from archives and transcripts • The research configuration is adaptable and one of a kind, and advances throughout the examination procedure; there are no fixed advances that ought to be pursued and cannot be imitated • Data are investigated by removing subjects • The unit of investigation is all-encompassing, focusing on the connections between components, settings, and so on; the entire is in every case more than the total 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a deductive type of thinking; gathers information to survey biased models, speculations and hypotheses • Uses an etic point of view; the importance is controlled by the specialist • Is nomothetic; intends to equitably quantify the social world, test theories, and anticipate and control human conduct • Sees reality as a goal • Tests speculations that the analyst starts with • Concepts are particular factors • Seeks to control wonders • Observations are deliberately attempted in an institutionalised way • Data are introduced by methods for accurate figures picked up from exact estimation • The research configuration is institutionalised by a fixed method and can be duplicated • Data investigation is attempted by methods for institutionalised factual techniques • The units of investigation are factors that are anatomistic (components that structure some portion of the entirety)

Source: April (2004, p.91)

The research approach selected for this study was qualitative, which the researcher used to investigate, interpret and describe the social realities of African Black female leaders. This methodology allowed the participants to make meaning of their own realities and influenced the construction of knowledge (Cohen et al., 2000).

3.2.1 Quality criteria and strategies

Schwandt et al. (2007) argued that ensuring high quality in qualitative research involves adhering to several common criteria that are recognised across various studies and discussions in the field. These criteria include credibility, transferability, trustworthiness, and confirmability. These criteria were proposed as counterparts to the criteria developed within the positivist research paradigm.

In a review of published journals that deliberated on the criteria for research rigour, Yadav (2022) highlighted that there is no universal, one-size-fits-all guideline for assessing the quality of qualitative research. Further, it underscored that no common set of guidelines exists among qualitative researchers. As such, the review emphasised that each qualitative approach should be evaluated based on its unique characteristics, considering different epistemological and disciplinary perspectives.

3.2.1.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the accuracy and truthfulness of a study's findings, emphasising the need for the research to present a faithful depiction of the phenomenon under investigation (Byram, 2022). Credibility is achieved through activities such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation and data collection. Peer debriefing is also recommended to provide an external check on the research process, which may increase credibility, as is examining referential adequacy to check preliminary findings and interpretations against the raw data (Denzin, 2009; Schwandt et al., 2007).

To achieve credibility, the researcher conducted desktop research to collate and review literature and studies on the topic under investigation. These were grouped into the theoretical constructs of literature, which were analysed to help set parameters for the research and support the researcher's navigation of emerging patterns. The process of deciding on the research questions ensured that they were appropriate and matched the researcher's aim of gaining a deep understanding of the phenomenon. These were examined and reviewed by the supervisor of the study to ensure they were aligned with the methodological assumptions (Gadamer, 1990).

Another method that was used to ensure credible data was that the transcripts were checked against the recordings. The transcription process was done by using an automatic transcribing and note-taking platform called Otter.ai, which makes use of artificial intelligence to translate

voice recordings into text (Otter.ai, 2021). All the transcripts were signed off as correct and true reflections of the interviews.

This research followed a phenomenological approach and thus did not include the step of sending the transcripts to the participants for a review and validation of findings. According to Webb (2003) and McConnell-Henry et al. (2011), there is no need to have member-checking in interpretive research to verify findings. This is grounded in the belief that a participant's story is true at a particular time and they may change their recollections, thereby changing their perceptions. The participants were, however, asked at the end of the interviews if they wanted to add or remove anything. Five participants who had mentioned company and individual names to illustrate points requested that the researcher did not add those details into the research findings.

The interviews were envisaged to last 60 – 90 minutes, which would ensure intensive contact with the phenomenon under investigation. There was prolonged engagement with, and constant observation of, the respondents, including noting their physical reactions which were non-verbal.

The approach used in the theory was achieved by referencing multiple theory lenses as highlighted in the conceptual framework. In this study, the researcher applied multiple theoretical lenses to analyse the dynamics of race, gender, class, the lived experiences of African Black females and intersectionality to gain a perspective on how these impact the leadership experience of African Black females.

Peer debriefing took place through the researcher's interactions with their supervisor as well as a professor at the Centre for Human Rights at one of South Africa's renowned academic institutions. This was recognised as fulfilling the steps of corroborating findings with "experts" in order to gain further insights through challenge and discussion (McConnell-Henry et al., 2011).

3.2.1.2 Transferability

In the context of this study, transferability refers to the extent to which the research findings can be applied in other contexts or settings. A researcher is responsible for providing descriptive data that show the narratives that were developed in the context of the study. This is so that those who seek to transfer the findings to their own studies can judge the fit of the study to theirs (Schwandt et al., 2007).

In this study, the direct quotations of participants are provided to illustrate their real responses as well as to ensure a verbatim account of their experiences in corporate South Africa. The researcher interviewed 25 participants, with the findings being generalisable to the experiences of the wider population group of African Black female leaders.

3.2.1.3 Dependability and confirmability

When readers can examine the research process, they are better able to judge the dependability of the research (Schwandt et al., 2007). A study can demonstrate dependability by ensuring that the research process is auditable, i.e., another researcher can follow the decision-making trail and understand the research process and findings (Koch, 1994; Yadav, 2022).

Similarly, to demonstrate confirmability, the researcher can include quotes or similar research data, quantify the findings where possible, ensure interpretations are arrived at through a clear inquiry process, demonstrate how conclusions are grounded in the data, and utilise reflexivity to acknowledge and address the researcher's preconceptions and biases (Koch, 1994; Schwandt et al., 2007; Yadav, 2022).

This study provided an audit trail through the notes from the interviews and the searchable coding of themes in the qualitative software used. By looking through all the transcripts and identifying similarities and differences, verbatim transcripts as well as recordings of the interviews, dependability was achieved. The researcher also outlined how they arrived at each decision made regarding topic selection, the literature review, the methodology used, and data collection. For confirmability, the researcher made use of similar research data from previous studies.

3.2.1.4 Reflexivity

Reflexivity entails the researcher's continuous self-examination and critical reflection of their own biases, assumptions, and influences throughout the research process. This practice aims to boost the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. The researcher needs to be mindful of their own positionality, including their background, beliefs, and experiences, as well as how these elements may affect their interactions with the participants and the interpretation of the data. Reflexivity demands that researchers be transparent about their role in the research process, including documenting their reflections and decisions to create a clear audit trail for others to follow. By practicing reflexivity, researchers can identify and mitigate potential biases, ensuring that findings are more accurately grounded in the data rather than being influenced by the researcher's preconceptions. Reflexivity enhances the overall credibility and

trustworthiness of qualitative research by showing that the researcher has critically engaged with their own impact on the research process (Lumsden et al., 2019 Nadin & Cassell, 2006).

Incorporating reflexivity allows researchers to offer a more nuanced and authentic representation of the research context and findings, ultimately strengthening the study's validity and reliability. The researcher made use of a diary, which assisted their documentation of the decisions, behaviours and processes followed in the research. This ensured regular reflection and ethical and methodological coherence (Nadin & Cassell, 2006), incorporating reflexivity as an important dimension in the design and implementation of the research (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). As per Lumsden et al. (2019, p.1): "By being reflexive, we acknowledge that social researchers cannot be separated from their autobiographies and will bring their own values to the research and how they interpret data."

3.3 Hermeneutic phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that combines the principles of phenomenology and hermeneutics to explore and interpret the lived experiences of individuals. It seeks to understand how people make sense of their experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them. This approach is grounded in the philosophical traditions of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which focuses on the study of consciousness and the structures of experience, as well as Martin Heidegger's hermeneutics, which emphasises interpretation and the historical context of understanding. Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to uncover the essence of experiences by interpreting the narratives and stories of participants, going beyond mere description to explore the deeper meanings and implications of these experiences (Dostal, 2007; Gadamer & Brotz, 1977; Kafle, 2011; Laverly, 2003; Zuckert, 2007).

Researchers using hermeneutic phenomenology engage in a cyclical process of data collection and analysis, often involving in-depth interviews, reflective journaling, and thematic analysis. This iterative process allows for a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher plays an active role in interpreting the data, acknowledging their own preconceptions and biases. Reflexivity is crucial, as the researcher's background and perspective influence the interpretation of the findings (Laverly, 2003).

The goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to provide rich, detailed insights into the human experience, offering a nuanced understanding that can inform practice, policy, and further research. The philosophical underpinnings of hermeneutic phenomenology include

understanding human behaviour by interpreting the meaning behind actions and speech that are influenced by societal goals and traditions and distanciation, which is the ability to step back from immediate desires and actions to critically evaluate them in the context of the societal norms and values. This enables objective behaviour and philosophical roots. By integrating these elements, hermeneutic phenomenology provides a comprehensive framework for exploring and interpreting the complexities of human experiences (Gadamer & Brotz, 1977; Dostal, 2002).

Hermeneutic phenomenology's roots are in the early 20th century, with the development of phenomenology by Edmund Husserl. Husserl's work focused on the study of consciousness and the structures of experience, with the aim of describing phenomena as they are perceived by individuals. Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, expanded phenomenology by incorporating hermeneutics, i.e., the art and science of interpretation. Heidegger emphasised the importance of historical context and the interpretive nature of human existence, shifting the focus from mere description to understanding the meaning of experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology emerged as a distinct approach by integrating the descriptive aspects of phenomenology with the interpretive aspects of hermeneutics. This integration allows for a deeper exploration of how individuals make sense of their lived experiences within their historical and cultural contexts (Gadamer & Brotz, 1977; Dostal, 2002).

The approach continued to evolve through the contributions of other philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, who further developed the hermeneutic aspect by emphasising the dialogical process of understanding and the fusion of horizons between the interpreter and the text. Hermeneutic phenomenology has been widely adopted in qualitative research, particularly in fields such as psychology, education, and health sciences. Researchers use this approach to gain rich, detailed insights into the lived experiences of individuals, acknowledging the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants (Dostal, 2002; Kafle, 2011; Zuckert, 2007).

Today, hermeneutic phenomenology remains a vital methodological approach in qualitative research, valued for its ability to provide a nuanced understanding of human experiences and the meanings individuals ascribe to them. It continues to inform practice, policy, and further research across various disciplines. By tracing its development from Husserl's phenomenology to Heidegger's hermeneutics and beyond, we can appreciate the rich history and ongoing

relevance of hermeneutic phenomenology in understanding human experiences (Kafle, 2011; Stanghellini et al., 2019).

The research methodology followed in this study is rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology, which is an epistemological approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a valuable qualitative research methodology for exploring and conveying the meaning of lived experiences. Bynum and Varpio (2018) described hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology that goes beyond describing a phenomenon to uncover its meaning in the context of everyday life, while Guerrero-Castañeda et al. (2019) reflected on the use of phenomenological analysis in nursing research, emphasising the hermeneutical circle as a methodological framework for understanding lived experiences.

In their insightful study, Stanghellini et al. (2019) shed light on the commonalities and disparities that exist within the fields of phenomenology and hermeneutics. By exploring these two distinct but interconnected approaches, the authors present a compelling argument for the integration of both methodologies in the pursuit of a comprehensive and interdisciplinary comprehension of mental illness.

Phenomenology, with its emphasis on the lived experiences of individuals, offers a profound exploration of the subjective nature of mental illness. By meticulously examining the essence and meaning of these experiences, phenomenologists strive to uncover the underlying structures and patterns that shape psychopathological phenomena. On the other hand, hermeneutics, with its interpretative lens, provides a valuable framework for understanding the cultural, historical, and contextual dimensions that influence the manifestation and understanding of mental illness. The above-mentioned studies highlight the benefits of using hermeneutic phenomenology in research to gain a deeper understanding of subjective experiences (Bynum & Varpio, 2018; Gadamer & Brotz, 1977; Stanghellini et al., 2019).

In the context of this study, hermeneutic phenomenology allowed for a deep exploration of the lived experiences of African Black female leaders in South Africa, considering their unique historical, cultural, and social contexts. This approach acknowledged that their leadership experiences are shaped by these contexts, providing a richer and more nuanced understanding. By integrating hermeneutics, the study delved into the meanings that African Black female leaders ascribe to their professional journeys. Unlike traditional phenomenology, which prioritises objectivity and the bracketing of researcher bias, hermeneutic phenomenology allowed the researcher to use her subjective experiences to make sense of the data (Laverly,

2003). This interpretive depth went beyond mere description, uncovering the underlying significance and personal insights that the participants had attached to their leadership journeys.

4 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES AND DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Data collection method

In-depth, qualitative, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (Lauterbach, 2018) were utilised to collect data for the study, with the face-to-face interviews allowing for synchronised two-way communication at a specific place and time (Opdenakker, 2006). An individual interview is a conversation between a person (respondent) and a qualitative researcher that aims to uncover the respondent's attitudes, thoughts and perceptions on the topic at hand (Robson & Foster, 1989).

The study's participants were 25 African Black females who worked as supervisory, junior, or senior level managers in a corporate company in South Africa. Convenience and purposive sampling were utilised as several African Black female leaders within the sector were known to the researcher. Convenience and purposive sampling allowed for the sampling of participants who were conveniently accessible to the researcher. As a result of the roles they play and the limited leadership participation at that level, the researcher relied on referrals from their direct contacts to reach their network. A sampling method known as snowball sampling is usually used to study 'hard-to-reach' populations, however the use of social media networking sites has proven to also be effective in the studying of 'hard-to-reach' populations in recent studies (Baltar & Brunet, 2012).

4.2 Data collection tool

Semi-structured interviews were used as they allowed the researcher to prepare primary questions that could be followed by probing or sub-questions. These needed to be open-ended to aid unstructured discussions where appropriate and generate more robust discussions (McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

Prior to the start of the interviews, the research objectives were explained to the participants. They were also informed that they would remain anonymous, their participation was voluntary, and if they had any concerns, they had the option to leave the interview and report any concerns to the study supervisor. The participants received no monetary reward for the interviews. All the participants signed a consent form and none left the study during the interview stage. Ethics

approval to conduct the study was granted by the Faculty of Commerce Ethics Committee (Facchin & Margola, 2016).

The approach used to conduct this study was that of storytelling, where the participants were asked to narrate particular events and scenarios from their personal experiences. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to have a dialogue with the participants, which is ideal for conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological study as the participants were offered an opportunity to express their deepest feelings and thoughts freely (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

Table 7 below lists the most frequently used data collection methods and provides context to the researcher’s choice of conducting one-on-one interviews.

Table 7. Summary of frequently used data collection tools

Data Collection Tools	Strengths/Weaknesses	Application
Documents & Archival Records	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predictable replication; same each time recovered • Exact subtleties: e.g., names, stream diagrams, introductions <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obscure creators may cause dubious inclination • Gathering might be particular or fragmented • May be restrictive; no entrance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate to support or expand other proof • Publicly accessible data makes proof assembling progressively proficient, giving foundation • Documents give methods for improving meeting dialogue
Interviews: One-on-one	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directed spotlight on research territory • Can be planned; time oversaw • Inside genuine setting exchange with members <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organised or semi-organised enquiries may restrict the formation of vigorous bits of knowledge, while non-organised enquiries may give varied and ‘shallow’ reactions • Depends on member review; members may tell researcher(s) what they need to hear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most normal information-gathering instruments utilised in business look into the contextual analysis strategy. • Interview, as an instrument can be joined with different apparatuses, for example, report and authentic data • Fits with business conditions where time is planned into limited periods or arrangements

Data Collection Tools	Strengths/Weaknesses	Application
Interviews: Focus Groups	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraged association takes into account information created through gathering collaboration • Speedier outcomes if skilfully directed <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires finding the opportune individuals to take an interest • Developed social settings may present a predisposition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used broadly in marketing research • Used as a post-overview device to acquire an understanding of review information • Diagnose potential issues, or commitments, of social projects
Observation: Direct or as a Participant	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genuine settings in which perceptions are made rather than research centres • An analyst, as a member, the relational elements can be profoundly canny; profound, powerful depictions <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tedious: may require 'hanging out' at extremely inconvenient times to be viewed as an insider • Normally a solitary case; not generalised • Potential predisposition of the 'takes one to know one' false notion; e.g., taking an interest in crime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate for top-to-bottom examinations of social gatherings or people inside their own settings • Highly canny direct perceptions, e.g., people exhibiting utilisation of systems; examining work process designs on the shop floor
Participant Action Research	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabled, democratising research relationship; depends on neighbourhood information • Improves members' forces of perception, mindfulness, and self-reflection <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profoundly mixed; must grow what is viewed as information. • Hard to sum up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valuable in a transitional 'third world' setting, where individuals may have been marginalised • Professional gatherings, for example, instructors or clinic staff where praxis grows new learning for development
Physical Artefacts	<p>Strengths:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product functionality easy to see, especially when generated

Data Collection Tools	Strengths/Weaknesses	Application
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insightful cultural or technical functionality <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be perishable; out of context • Selective bias—e.g., see objects that slant viewpoint 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objects such as awards hold social meaning for groups or individuals
Audio-Visual Taping	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replicable and can be replayed with no loss of evidence • More robust data—both visual and auditory within the camera frame <p>Weakness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants may ‘act’ for the camera 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used to support other efforts, e.g., focus groups • Can be highly effective in demonstration practice, e.g., in classrooms, hospitals, etc. • An evaluation tool to determine how experts agree or disagree on the same videoed event

Source: April (2004, p.77)

An interview protocol/guide was used to gather data from the respondents, with voice recordings of each interview being done to ensure all aspects of the conversation were captured while ensuring anonymity (Stockdale, 2002). The interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and other virtual meeting platforms to adhere to the COVID-19 lockdown regulations, which restricted face-to-face interactions to prevent the spread of the virus. Audio recordings are the most cost-effective way to gather data that are clear and easy to transfer for transcribing purposes (Stockdale, 2002). By recording the interviews, the researcher was able to focus on their responses during the discussion without getting distracted by the need to write comprehensive notes (Stuckey, 2014).

4.3 Data collection procedure

A data management plan was developed, which was provided to the University and checked by the research supervisor. As part of the respondent recruitment process, respondents were screened to assess if they met the managerial level criteria outlined in the section above. Appointments were then made with those who met the criteria.

Although there are no set times for conducting an interview, an hour is a common time allocated given work pressures. Participants such as those for this research are also likely to request their assistants to schedule time (Harvey, 2011). Allocating too much time to interviews

may impact a respondent's ability to participate, thereby making it difficult to get respondents for the study (Harvey, 2011; Stephens, 2007).

If the interview time elapsed before the completion of the interview process or there was a need for follow-up questions and points of clarification, the interviewer arranged telephonic interviews with the respondents to close any gaps in the interviews that may have been created by time limitations (Stephens, 2007).

During the time that this study was being conducted, the World Health Organisation announced the COVID-19 global health pandemic with regulations that limited face-to-face interaction (WHO, 2020). This resulted in a modification of the data collection procedures. The face-to-face interviews were conducted remotely via video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Skype and Microsoft Teams. Zoom was predominantly used. Only voice was recorded in this process to ensure the anonymity of the research respondents (Stephens, 2007).

The place where an interview is conducted could affect the nature of the responses provided, therefore the virtual interviews were conducted at the respondents' preferred locations, which made the interview settings more comfortable for them (Elwood & Martin, 2000).

4.4 Data analysis

Given that this study employed the hermeneutic phenomenology methodology, the data analysis framework selected aligned with Gadamer's (1977) principles, as simplified by Fleming et al. (2003). These authors provided an analytical framework with five steps to ensure that researchers adhere to the main concepts of Gadamer's (1977) philosophy: pre-understandings, fusion of horizons, and the hermeneutic circle. This framework was also utilised by Alsaigh and Coyne (2021) in their study, which offered a clearer and more updated outlook on the five steps. Figure 7 below illustrates this updated view, which guided the data analysis of this particular study.

Step	Fleming et al. (2003) (based on Gadamer (1960) seminal text)	Ajjawi & Higgs (2007)	Stage	Steps followed	
1	Appropriate open research question		1	Choosing an appropriate open research question	
2	Identification of pre-understandings		2	Identification of pre-understandings	
3	Gaining understanding through dialogue with participants	Analytical stage I Immersion	3	Gaining understanding through dialogue with participants (interviews and diaries)	
4	Gaining understanding through dialogue with text (hermeneutic circle and fusion of horizons)	2	Understanding	4	Transcribing/iterative reading/preliminary interpretation of texts to facilitate coding/identifying first order (participant's horizon) constructs
		3	Abstraction	5	Identifying second order (the researcher's horizon) constructs = integration
		4	Synthesis and theme development	6	Meshing the horizons/themes are developed and challenged by the researcher = aggregation
		5	Illumination and illustration of phenomena	7	Linking the literature to the themes identified
		6	Integration and critique	8	Critique of the themes/reporting final interpretation at this point in time (fusion of horizons)
5	Establishing trustworthiness		9	Establishing trustworthiness	

Figure 7. Gadamerian Hermeneutic Phenomenology Analytical Framework

Source: Alsaigh and Coyne (2021, p.4)

Step one: Choosing the appropriate research questions

Gadamer (1990) posited that the essence of questioning is to open up possibilities for understanding, emphasising the impact of asking the right questions to elaborate on the hermeneutic situation. This suggests that the initial research question shapes the entire research process. Gadamer also asserted that understanding cannot occur without the activity of questioning. The close relationship between questioning and understanding is central to the hermeneutic experience and hermeneutic research. It is crucial for researchers to remain oriented to the subject under study and to continue asking relevant questions throughout the research process to maintain this focus.

In this study, the participants were informed of the research's aim during the consent stage, emphasising the exploration of the lived experiences of African Black females in corporate South Africa. During the interviews this aim was reiterated, with the participants being briefed on the forthcoming open-ended questions regarding their corporate experiences (Lavery, 2003). They were urged to reflect thoughtfully and share candidly, as the researcher aimed to gather insights and significance from their unique viewpoints. Furthermore, the participants were notified that follow-up questions would be asked to deepen the researcher's understanding of the subject matter.

The participants were also advised that an interview guide would be used by the researcher to help guide the conversation and ensure that all the relevant aspects of the participants' stories were captured while allowing flexibility in the conversation (Kallio et al., 2016).

Given that the main research question was:

What are the lived experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa, the following sub-questions were:

- How did you get to work in your current organisation?
- How have you experienced being an African Black female leader in the Organisations in which you worked?
- How have your experiences shaped or informed your understanding of leadership?
- How would you describe who you really are – your identity/all aspects of it?
- What has influenced your most important career decisions?
- Do you feel that you have the power to completely make all of your workplace decisions, or are you undermined at times? Please give examples.
- Has your gender ever played a role in holding you back in your career? Please explain.
- In which ways has your background played a role in your leadership style and how you engage your colleagues and subordinates?
- Do you feel that being African Black has played, or still plays, a role in your legitimacy as a leader?
- How do you think you are viewed in relation to male leaders in similar positions?
- What would you say your biggest challenges are as a leader?
- Do you feel that your socioeconomic background has played, or still plays a role, in your legitimacy as a leader?
- How do your experiences make you feel about being in corporate South Africa?
- To what do you ascribe your experiences?
- How would you describe an ideal leadership experience for women leaders?

These questions were used throughout the interviews to ensure that the researcher attained a deep understanding of the research phenomenon (Geanellos, 1999).

Step two: Identification of pre-understanding

Fleming et al. (2003) emphasised the importance of researchers staying open to uncovering their own hidden biases, as these can restrict the breadth of understanding. To avoid this

limitation, researchers must continuously challenge their assumptions. Failing to do so can constrain the scope of understanding and prevent the formation of a comprehensive view of the subject, as the context might be mistakenly considered to be fully understood (Geanellos, 1999).

During her 15-year leadership journey in corporate South Africa, the researcher had encountered and navigated numerous challenges. As an African Black female leader, the intersectionality of race and gender discrimination had been a significant hurdle for her. The compound effect of being a woman and Black often placed additional obstacles on her path to leadership success. This dual discrimination at times hindered her ability to fully exercise her leadership potential, as she had to constantly prove her worth in environments that were not always welcoming or supportive.

The legacy of apartheid cast a long shadow over South Africa, and its impact is still felt in the corporate sector. The ongoing systemic barriers have required the researcher to work twice as hard to achieve recognition and success, often pushing her to break through entrenched biases and stereotypes. The gendered nature of leadership discourse in South Africa has further complicated her leadership journey. Societal norms and expectations often dictate that leadership is a male domain, which can undermine the authority and effectiveness of female leaders. Navigating this gendered landscape has required the researcher to consistently assert her leadership style and capabilities, ensuring that her voice is heard and respected despite prevailing biases. In the attempt to assert herself, the researcher has been labelled “bossy” and “aggressive”, which are traits typically attached to male leaders, as well as being accused of “trying too much to be like a man”.

Hermeneutic phenomenology encouraged the researcher to reflect on her own preconceptions and biases. This reflective practice helped her to ensure that the interpretations were more authentic and grounded in the participants' perspectives, rather than being influenced by her own assumptions. The concept of the “fusion of horizons” allowed the study to bridge the gap between the participants' historical and cultural backgrounds and the researcher's perspective (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

During the research process, the researcher played a dual role as the researcher and a member of the same group (African Black female leader). The advantage of this was that it built trust and confidence in the researcher-participant relationship during the data-gathering process (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). However, the disadvantage was that the researcher may have assumed

meaning and understanding, without seeking further clarification and explanation (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Lavery, 2003).

The researcher shared deep pain and regret that the corporate South is making very little effort to transform to keep people like themselves in the system. The researcher had personal experiences where her leadership legitimacy was questioned as a result of intersectionalities of race, gender, class and physical appearance. By discussing these with her supervisor, family and other associates in the academic space, the researcher was able to pinpoint her individual pre-understandings of the study. During this stage, the pre-understanding remained as points of data collection for this study until they were utilised in the write-up stage of the research. To help with keeping focused on this and ensuring the transformation only happened during writing, the researcher used a diary to capture her feelings and reflections. Going through these notes helped the researcher stick to the phenomenon under study and enabled entry into the hermeneutic circle (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Geanellos, 2000).

Step three: Gaining understanding through dialogue with participants

To gain understanding, the researcher needed to ensure there was a dialogue between two people (researcher and participant) but there should be a dialogue between the reader and text. In both these instances, the common thread that brought everything together was language; in language and the understanding thereof, a deeper understanding can be achieved (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Fleming et al., 2003).

In this study, the researcher ensured there were commonalities in the language being used and where acronyms were used, they were questioned for clarification. All the participants had a good command of the English language, which helped in the process of understanding. Through the continuous use of the research diary in the data collection, data analysis and write-up stages, the researcher captured the elements that represented temporality, ensuring that all aspects of the interview were presented. The researcher captured the unsaid as well, i.e., body language and facial expressions (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

Step four: Gaining understanding through dialogue with text (hermeneutic circle and fusion of horizons)

In conducting this study on the lived experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa, the researcher applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). This method provides a structured yet adaptable framework for

qualitative research. The process commenced with familiarisation, whereby the researcher immersed herself in the data by thoroughly reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. This initial phase was essential for gaining an in-depth understanding of the content and identifying preliminary patterns and key points of interest.

The process of transcribing voice recordings is very time-consuming and needs to be done accurately to avoid research bias. The accuracy of the transcription determines the accuracy of data and its degree of dependability (Stuckey, 2014).

Following familiarisation, the researcher moved on to generating the initial codes. During this phase, the transcripts were systematically reviewed, creating concise labels that captured the core essence of significant data segments. This coding process included both open codes, which focused on explicit meanings, and selective codes, which delved into underlying themes. Detailed documentation of the codes' development was maintained to track their progression and ensure alignment with the research questions. A summary of this is provided in Table 9. This meticulous groundwork was vital for establishing a comprehensive coding framework that accurately reflected the data (Byrne, 2022).

The ultimate purpose of coding is to organise the data in a way that meaningful sense can be made of the myriad, intersectional lived experiences of the African Black female leaders. To facilitate these tasks, Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) was used for data analysis, specifically NVivo, MAXQA 24 and ChatGPT 4.0 for analysis. These systems were selected to help lessen the burden of manually organising the large amount of data that came from the 25 interviews conducted during the data-gathering phase of this study. It is key to note that the CAQDAS was not used as a tool to analyse, but merely to organise and manage the data. The systems did provide some challenges for the researcher, as the NVivo software in particular was a complex tool that required the researcher to undergo technical training, which was time-consuming (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The third phase involved generating themes by organising the initial codes into broader themes that represented major patterns within the data. This phase required iterative reviews and refinement, whereby the themes were scrutinised and restructured to ensure they provided a coherent and thorough representation of the data. This process included merging overlapping codes and clearly defining the boundaries of each theme, supported by illustrative and analytic data extracts. These themes were further reviewed and refined to ensure they were distinct yet

collectively cohesive, telling a comprehensive story of the participants' experiences (Braun et al., 2019).

In the defining and naming themes phase, the researcher provided a detailed analysis of each theme's relevance to the research questions. This included selecting compelling quotes from the participants to vividly illustrate the themes. Finally, in producing the report, the themes were synthesised into a coherent narrative, integrating relevant literature and contextual analysis to highlight the study's contributions. This reflexive approach enabled a rich, nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences, recognising the active role of the researcher in interpreting the data (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; April, 2004; Braun et al., 2019; Byrne, 2022; Domingue, 2015).

Step five: Establishing trustworthiness

In the context of this particular study, the phenomenological nature of this study allowed the researcher to analyse the data through the identification of their prior assumptions and knowledge on the topic, and pay attention to the ongoing process of reflection and engagement. This was a reiterative process in the process of sense-making. The phenomenological methodology in this study facilitated ongoing reflection and engagement, allowing the researcher to continuously immerse themselves in the evolving narratives and ensuring that the richness of the participants' experiences was thoroughly captured. This iterative process of reflection (hermeneutic circle) not only deepened the researcher's understanding of the data, but also provided opportunities for refining the research questions, methods, and interpretations as the study unfolded (Roulston, 2014).

To achieve trustworthiness, the researcher applied the comprehensive quality criteria and strategies outlined by Schwandt et al. (2007). These strategies were meticulously followed to ensure the four key aspects outline above: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

- *Credibility*: The researcher employed techniques such as prolonged engagement and persistent observation by spending extended time in the interview process, continuously observing and gathering diverse data sources, the researcher aimed to accurately represent the participants' experiences and perspectives.

- *Dependability*: An audit trail was maintained, documenting all research processes and decisions. This included detailed records of data collection, analysis, and methodological changes, allowing for an assessment of the research process and its consistency over time.
- *Confirmability*: Efforts were made to ensure that the findings were shaped by the participants' responses and not researcher bias or motivations. This was achieved through reflexive journaling, where the researcher continually reflected on and documented their own biases, assumptions, and decision-making processes.

Transferability: The researcher provided rich, thick descriptions of the research context and participants, enabling others to determine the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other settings or groups. This involved a detailed account of the participants' backgrounds, the corporate environments they worked in, and the specific circumstances of their experiences.

Although there are many ways to analyse interviews, this study employed the 'narrative cognition' approach, which presents findings as the participants' unique stories. This approach offers the flexibility to present these narratives either with or without thematic analysis. Consequently, the results of this study were framed within the research parameters established at the outset, which aimed to capture and highlight the essence of the lived experiences of African Black females. This method was chosen to ensure that the participants' personal stories were central to the research findings, providing a rich and detailed understanding of their experiences (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; McCall, 2005).

Figure 3 illustrates the key components of existing theories referenced in this study, as outlined by Esin et al. (2014) and Roulston (2014). These components were integral to defining the research parameters and guiding the narrative analysis. By grounding the study in established literature, the research sought to contextualise the participants' experiences within broader theoretical frameworks. This approach not only validated the findings but also linked them to existing knowledge, enhancing the overall depth and relevance of the study.

5 RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

In this section, the researcher showcases the richness of the qualitative data, offering vivid snapshots of the participants' voices, experiences, and perspectives. Through chosen excerpts from the interviews, the researcher brings the human dimension to the forefront, highlighting the lived realities that underpin the study's outcomes.

In this analysis, the researcher not only highlights the surface-level discoveries, but also explores the underlying themes, complexities, and complexities embedded within the data. Uncovering these layers of meaning contributes to a deeper comprehension of the subject. The researcher summarises the findings based on the demographic-type questions that were asked at the start of each interview. Utilising a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the research explores how these experiences relate to constructs from existing literature on leadership dynamics, race, gender, class, and intersectionality. The findings highlight the persistent gap in the representation of Black females in senior leadership positions despite affirmative action policies.

This study contributes to the knowledge base and builds on theories about African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa, by providing an updated view of the leadership dynamics facing African Black females in corporate structures 29 years post the Apartheid regime.

5.2 Research participants

The number of participants initially targeted was 40, however the final number of participants interviewed was 25, as data saturation was reached. Data saturation occurs when there is no new data that can be extracted to add to the findings of the study. The participants were exclusively from the race group that falls under the demographic “African Black”, which is African Black in the South African context. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned to them, given that they are living persons.

5.2.1 Profiles of research participants

Table 8: Profiles of research participants

Participant Number	Pseudo Name	Age	No. of Children	Highest Level of Education	High School Attended	University Attended	Current Management Level	Town of Birth	Currently Resident in	Working Life in Years
1	Anele	53	2	Doctorate	Township/Rural	University of the North West	Senior	Johannesburg (Gauteng)	Johannesburg	30
2	Bandile	55	3	Masters	Township/Rural	WITS Business School	Executive	Johannesburg (Gauteng)	Johannesburg	30
3	Cebisile	44	2	Post-grad	Model C	University of Rhodes	Senior	Johannesburg (Gauteng)	Johannesburg	21
4	Dumazile	45	0	Masters	Private	University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB)	Senior	Mamelodi (Gauteng)	Mogale City	25
5	Enhle	35	1	Post-grad	Model C	IE Business School	Executive	East London (Eastern Cape)	Johannesburg	15
6	Funeka	40	0	Masters	Model C	University of Cape Town	Executive	Soweto (Gauteng)	Johannesburg	20
7	Gugulethu	39	1	Masters	Model C	University of Johannesburg	Executive	Johannesburg (Gauteng)	Johannesburg	20
8	Hlengiwe	42	0	Post-grad	Model C	WITS University	Executive	Johannesburg (Gauteng)	Johannesburg	16
9	Jabulile	36	1	Masters	Private	MANCOSA	Executive	Gaborone (Botswana)	Johannesburg	7
10	Khanya	38	0	Masters	Model C	University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB)	Senior	Taung (North West)	Johannesburg	15
11	Londi	42	2	Masters	Model C	University of the North West	Middle	Emalahleni (Mpumalanga)	Johannesburg	18
12	Lindiwe	40	1	Under-grad	Model C	Durban University of Technology	Senior	Empangeni (Kwa-Zulu Natal)	Johannesburg	21
13	Linda	31	1	Masters	Model C	University of Pretoria Business School (GIBS)	Senior	Durban (Kwa-Zulu- Natal)	Johannesburg	8
14	Mbali	37	1	Post-grad	Model C	VEGA School	Senior	Mandini (Kwa-Zulu Natal)	Johannesburg	14

15	Ntobeko	40	2	Post-grad	Model C	Harvard Business School	Executive	Durban (Kwa-Zulu- Natal)	Johannesburg	18
16	Phaphama	40	2	Post-grad	Model C	University of Kwa-Zulu Natal	Senior	Pietermaritzburg (Kwa-Zulu Natal)	Johannesburg	18
17	Qondisile	34	0	Post-grad	Model C	University of Johannesburg	Senior	Durban (Kwa-Zulu- Natal)	Johannesburg	8
18	Qophelo	46	2	Post-grad	Private	University of Natal	Executive	Empangeni (Kwa-Zulu Natal)	Johannesburg	20
19	Sindi	44	0	Doctorate	Township/ Rural	University of Kwa-Zulu Natal	Executive	Empangeni (Kwa-Zulu Natal)	Johannesburg	27
20	Simphiwe	49	3	Masters	Private	WITS Business School	Executive	Maseru (Lesotho)	Johannesburg	25
21	Thandeka	49	3	Post-grad	Township/ Rural	University of Cape Town	Executive	Mamelodi (Gauteng)	Johannesburg	27
22	Vuyelwa	59	2	Under-grad	Private	National University of Minnesota	Executive	Johannesburg (Gauteng)	Johannesburg	40
23	Wandisa	39	0	Masters	Model C	University of Cape Town	Executive	Mafikeng (North West)	City of Tshwane	15
24	Xolisa	50	2	Masters	Township/ Rural	University of Kwa-Zulu Natal	Executive	Bizana (Eastern Cape)	Johannesburg	27
25	Zandile	48	1	Post-grad	Private	University of Kwa-Zulu N	Executive	Durban (Kwa-Zulu- Natal)	Johannesburg	20

The profiles of the research respondents as depicted in Table 8 above can be summarised as follows:

Age: The average age of the respondents was 43 years. The youngest respondent in the group was 31 and the oldest was 59.

Children: Almost three quarters (72%) of the respondents indicated that they had at least one child. Some of the women who did not have children expressed their desire to have children in the near future, however some wished not to have children.

Highest level of qualification: All the respondents held a postgraduate qualification, with the majority of them having achieved a master's level qualification.

Town of birth versus current place of residence: Almost two thirds (64%) of the respondents were born outside Gauteng, however 96% of them resided in the province. Although Gauteng accounts for only 1.5% of South Africa's land area, it is home to more than a quarter of its population, is highly urbanised, and contains the country's largest city, Johannesburg (one of the largest cities in the world). Gauteng is the wealthiest province in South Africa and is considered the financial hub of Africa, with the highest number of workers.

Based on the thematic analysis, the narrative was structured around the main themes identified: career progression and recruitment, challenges and experiences, leadership and empowerment, identity and personal traits, influence of background, and race and legitimacy. Each section is supported by excerpts from the participants to illustrate the findings.

5.3 Themes identified

Based on the thematic analysis, the narrative was structured around the main themes identified: proving competence and overcoming biases, support systems and mentorship, balancing work and personal life, leadership styles and personal resilience, navigating male-dominated environments, influence of upbringing and education, striving for excellence and recognition, pathway to leadership, authority and empowerment, ideal leadership experience, intersectionality and identity, coping strategies. Each theme was supported by quotes from the participants to illustrate the findings.

Table 9: Summary of open, axial and selective codes

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code	Quotes
Proving Competence and Overcoming Biases	Demonstrating Competence	First woman executive	"I was the first Black woman executive, and I had to work twice as hard to be taken seriously." – Anele
		Working twice as hard	"I have to be twice as good just to be considered equal." – Bandile
		Continuous self-improvement	"I keep upgrading myself, getting more qualifications to stay ahead." – Funeka
		Assertiveness in meetings	"If I don't speak up, they will assume I have nothing to contribute." – Gugulethu
Support Systems and Mentorship	Mentorship and Guidance	Importance of mentorship	"My mentors guided me through tough times and helped me see my potential." – Phaphama
		Professional networks	"I rely on professional networks for advice and opportunities." – Lindiwe
		Family support	"My family is my backbone, without their support, I wouldn't have made it this far." – Simphiwe
		Sponsorship and advocacy	"Having someone who can vouch for me in critical spaces makes all the difference." – Sindi
Balancing Work and Personal Life	Work-Life Balance Challenges	Balancing work and family responsibilities	"Balancing my career with family life is a constant struggle, but I make it work." – Thandeka
		Support system at home	"My partner is very supportive; we share responsibilities at home." – Mbali
		Setting boundaries	"Setting boundaries is essential to avoid burnout." – Xolisa
		Prioritising and compromising	"I've had to compromise on some things to manage both my family and career." – Bandile
Leadership Styles and Personal Resilience	Inclusive Leadership	Collaborative approach	"I believe in working with my team and ensuring everyone has a voice." – Funeka

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code	Quotes
		Leading by example	"I lead by example, showing my team that resilience and hard work pay off." – Anele
		Empathy and understanding	"Empathy is central to my leadership approach; I've been through tough times myself." – Jabulile
		Supportive environment	"I want to create a nurturing and inclusive environment for everyone." – Gugulethu
Navigating Male-Dominated Environments	Asserting Authority in Male Spaces	Asserting authority	"In male-dominated spaces, I've learned to speak up and take my place at the table." – Cebisile
		Building professional relationships	"Building strong relationships is key to navigating corporate spaces." – Sindi
		Resilience and confidence	"It takes resilience and confidence to stay strong in these environments." – Simphiwe
		Continuous validation	"I constantly feel the need to prove that I deserve my place here." – Bandile
Influence of Upbringing and Education	Impact of Early Life and Education	Emphasis on education	"My parents always emphasised that education is the key to success." – Vuyelwa
		Resilience from early life experiences	"Coming from a difficult background taught me resilience." – Lindiwe
		Supportive family environment	"My family's support has been crucial in pushing me forward." – Anele
		Educational background	"My education gave me the foundation I needed to succeed in corporate." – Bandile
Striving for Excellence and Recognition	Pursuit of Excellence	High performance standards	"Excellence is not negotiable; it's the only way to gain respect." – Funeka
		Overcoming stereotypes	"I've had to push back against stereotypes to be taken seriously." – Anele
		Motivation to succeed	"I've always been driven to succeed, no matter what obstacles I face." – Thandeka

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code	Quotes
		Recognition and respect	"Gaining recognition is difficult, but I keep striving for it." – Cebisile
Pathway to Leadership	Career Development and Growth	Diverse career paths	"My career path wasn't straight; I moved through several industries to reach leadership." – Mbali
		Career growth and development	"Continuous growth is what helped me reach where I am today." – Simphiwe
		Influence of mentors	"Mentors played a crucial role in guiding my career." – Jabulile
		Overcoming barriers	"I've overcome many barriers to get here, but I never gave up." – Phaphama
Authority and Empowerment	Feeling Empowered in Leadership	Autonomy in decision-making	"Being empowered means having the freedom to make important decisions." – Xolisa
		Support from superiors	"Having support from my superiors has been crucial for my confidence." – Gugulethu
		Trust and recognition	"Empowerment comes from knowing my contributions are trusted and valued." – Anele
		Strategies for empowerment	"I've learned to assert my authority and make sure my voice is heard." – Khanya
Ideal Leadership Experiences	Aspirations for Leadership	Valued contributions	"I want to be in a space where my contributions are valued equally." – Thandeka
		Equal opportunities	"An ideal environment is one where everyone gets equal opportunities." – Mbali
		Inclusivity and diversity	"Leadership should be inclusive, embracing diversity in all forms." – Sindi
		Support and resources	"Having the right resources and support is key to effective leadership." – Lindiwe

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code	Quotes
Intersectionality and Identity	Navigating Intersectional Identities	Navigating biases	"Being both Black and female, I constantly navigate biases that others don't face." – Anele
		Dual identity challenges	"As a Black woman, I deal with both racial and gender biases." – Bandile
		Leveraging unique perspectives	"My perspective as a Black woman adds value in ways others might not see." – Cebisile
		Identity awareness	"I'm always aware of how my identity affects how people see me." – Funeka
Coping Strategies	Strategies for Resilience	Building support networks	"I cope by surrounding myself with people who understand and support me." – Phaphama
		Self-care practices	"I make time for self-care, whether it's exercise or spending time with family." – Gugulethu
		Positive outlook	"Staying positive is essential, even when the odds are against me." – Funeka
		Resilience and focus	"I've had to be resilient and stay focused on my goals, no matter the challenges." – Anele

5.3.1 *Proving competence and overcoming biases*

Participants often found themselves as the first or only woman, or the first or only Black individual, in their role. This unique position was frequently met with doubt and a lack of confidence from colleagues and superiors, who questioned their capabilities and competence. Despite their extensive experience and academic qualifications, these women were under constant scrutiny, which ranged from subtle doubts about their abilities to overt challenges to their decisions and authority.

The participants expressed deep frustration over the perpetual need to prove their competence. They felt that their qualifications and professional experiences should be sufficient, yet they were compelled to repeatedly demonstrate their abilities. This ongoing need for validation was not only exhausting but also demoralising, as it implied that their credentials were insufficient in ways their male or White counterparts did not experience. The constant need to prove themselves became a significant emotional and mental burden, affecting their job satisfaction and sometimes their career progression.

I was the first woman executive and the first Black woman executive in an organisation that was over 100 years old with certain embedded cultures. Making changes was difficult. We had to prove that we were not placed in positions just for the sake of it. We had to prove our work ethic and capability. (Anele)

When I started, they made it clear they didn't trust my capabilities because I don't come from a scientific background. I've had challenges being heard but I'm not sure if it's because I'm female and Black or if it stems from other issues. I've had to work harder to demonstrate my competence. (Hlengiwe)

There is an assumption that I'll take the minutes even though it's not my meeting. I've had to address that. Also, when planning business trips, I'm told I can't go alone because I'm a woman. It's frustrating having to constantly prove my worth. (Thandeka)

Maybe Black men have to work twice as hard but as a Black woman, three times as hard to be seen and to show that you work. And you need to be quite articulate.... (Gugulethu)

In my generation, we have no other way. That was our way of survival. My family suffered. So you have these people that help you, the drivers, because you also want to prove that you can work till 7pm. (Xolisa)

There were times I felt undermined, especially in male-dominated meetings. However, I've learned to assert myself and ensure my voice is heard. It's a constant battle to be taken seriously. (Bandile)

Proving my competence has always been a significant part of my journey. In meetings, I often find my suggestions dismissed until they are echoed by someone else. This constant need to validate myself is exhausting but necessary. (Londi)

In construction, a sector dominated by men, I constantly have to prove that I know what I'm doing. It's not enough to just perform well; you have to exceed expectations

consistently. My experience I won't presume that it's like that for other Black women but you're constantly proving yourself. I think is the bottom line. (Phaphama)

I've had to work twice as hard to get half the recognition. Being a Black woman in leadership means constantly battling stereotypes and biases. It's about showing up every day and proving you belong. (Mwali)

...I'm not here to talk to you about grammar. I am here to talk to you about a substantive issue affecting my data. Yet the first thing you pick up on is the fact that I spelt 'the' without an 'h'... (Lindiwe)

Lindiwe demonstrated her frustration when she described how, in one instance, her work was scrutinised so much that her colleagues missed the whole point of her discussion and the issues she was raising. Instead, they chose to focus on trivial issues such as a spelling error in the work she had delivered. This highlighted the harsh judgement African Black women have to undergo when presenting work, unlike their White counterparts.

...as a Black female, the experience is that most of the time people do look at you like they don't like you. You find it difficult to gain any respect. In the beginning stages you find it difficult to influence people... (Enhle)

...there was a tendency of people deliberately sabotaging you know you in that they will go directly to the people that report to you to say this is what we require to this and do that and do that. (Thandeka)

Enhle and Thandeka's statements highlight the prevalent issue of bias and prejudice that African Black female leaders face, which leads to significant emotional and psychological barriers and an undermining of their confidence and sense of belonging. The struggle for respect and the challenge of influencing others early in their careers highlights the additional efforts required to prove their worth and capabilities. Enhle's experience indicates a need for organisational change to address implicit biases and create a more inclusive and respectful workplace.

To navigate these challenges and affirm their value, they constantly pursue further qualifications and invest in their professional growth. This ongoing dedication to education and training helps them build confidence and credibility in their positions. They have realised the importance of standing up for themselves and making their presence felt in order to be taken seriously by their colleagues and superiors.

Their commitment to continuous self-improvement stems from a desire to eliminate any doubts about their abilities. This involves not only keeping up with industry developments and gaining new skills, but also engaging in leadership programmes and other professional development

opportunities. By doing so, they arm themselves with the knowledge and tools necessary to excel and lead effectively.

Additionally, these leaders understand the significance of assertiveness in their professional settings. They have learned to voice their ideas and advocate for their decisions with confidence.

There's an unspoken expectation that I have to be better than my peers to be considered equal. This has meant long hours and continuous self-improvement to stay ahead. (Linda)

The biases I face are multifaceted. It's not just about being a woman but being a Black woman. Proving my competence involves a relentless pursuit of excellence. (Simphiwe)

Despite my qualifications and experience, I still encounter skepticism about my abilities. It's a constant fight to be taken seriously and not just as a token. (Ntobeko)

I've had to navigate a lot of bias, especially in the early stages of my career. Proving my worth was about demonstrating my expertise and resilience in the face of doubt. (Sindi)

The challenge is to constantly prove that I'm not just filling a quota but that I bring real value. It's a continuous effort to change perceptions. (Jabulile)

Every day is an opportunity to prove that I deserve my position. It's about exceeding expectations and breaking down the biases that people hold. (Cebisile)

This assertiveness is vital in male-dominated environments where their contributions might otherwise be ignored or undervalued.

Participants also highlighted the pay disparity that they face as Black women.

In many instances, companies don't understand that you can vary policies. And they just take the minimum of the basic conditions. Instead of having a framework for women, companies should ensure that all policies are women-friendly. For example, maternity leave can be made paid. Many companies just adhere to the bare minimum, resulting in policies that do not favour women, thereby perpetuating pay gaps and discrepancies... (Bandile)

Bandile, who is a human resources lead, highlighted the policy implementation gaps that companies have and also referenced pay disparities. She spoke with frustration and despondency as she made this point.

When discussing remuneration, it's clear that many women, especially Black women, are underpaid compared to their male counterparts. Even at the executive level, I've noticed that women often have to prove their worth continuously to get the same salary that men receive automatically. It's exhausting and discouraging, but it's a reality we face every day. (Bandile)

Simphiwe made a point about the plight of African Black women in these corporate environments, where the fight is not only about proving yourself more than others, but also about not getting compensated the same as your colleagues.

What I've seen is a lot of noise about hiring Black people but very little about compensating them fairly. I had to fight for equal pay despite having the same qualifications and experience as my white colleagues. This struggle is not just about getting a seat at the table, but ensuring we are valued and compensated equally once we're there. (Simphiwe)

5.3.2 Support systems and mentorships

The importance of having mentors and support systems in place emerged as a recurring and significant theme in the experiences of African Black female leaders. This theme highlights how these support systems are essential for professional development and overcoming the unique barriers faced by African Black female leaders.

Mentorship is key for the career progression of Black leaders. Mentors serve multiple roles, including offering practical guidance and emotional support, and acting as advocates for their mentees' career advancement. These relationships often go beyond mere advice, providing a critical source of sponsorship that helps mentees gain visibility and opportunities within their organisations. Mentors can help open doors to new career paths, provide valuable insights into navigating corporate politics, and offer a sounding board for professional decisions.

Support systems extend beyond mentorship to include professional networks and family. Professional networks are crucial as they provide a platform for sharing experiences, seeking advice, and gaining new perspectives. These networks can offer practical support, such as job referrals and career advice, and emotional support by providing a community of peers who understand the unique challenges faced by African Black female leaders.

Family support also plays a critical role in the professional lives of these leaders, as the backing of family members can provide the emotional stability needed to handle the stresses of demanding corporate roles. Family support can also manifest in practical ways, such as helping with childcare or other responsibilities, thereby allowing African Black female leaders to focus more on their careers.

These support systems collectively help mitigate the effects of workplace biases, which African Black female leaders frequently encounter. By providing a robust network of support, mentorship, and advocacy, these systems help to counteract the negative impacts of discrimination and bias, fostering an environment where these leaders can thrive. This multifaceted support is essential for their personal and professional growth, helping them to build resilience, gain confidence, and achieve their career goals.

Bandile highlighted the critical role of a supportive board and mentors in her career development, while her grandmother's words of wisdom reinforced her determination to succeed.

Having a supportive board and mentors was crucial for my development. My grandmother's words resonated with me throughout my career, reminding me not to let anyone take away my dignity and education. This determination helped me fight for my place and success in the corporate world. (Bandile)

Funeka demonstrated how participating in professional organisations outside her expertise built her confidence and established valuable networks. Her leadership role also allowed her to draw talent and empower others.

Participating in professional organisations outside my area of expertise helped. It built my confidence and established networks beyond the work environment. Being president of an African women's body of finance professionals, allowed me to draw talent and empower others. (Funeka)

Enhle's statement highlights the critical nature of these networks in adapting to new environments and emphasises how such support systems can be essential for survival and success in new and unfamiliar workplace settings.

In my current environment, within two and a half years of meeting my seniors, I had their cell numbers. I told them, 'You're going to be my sister. You're going to be my brother'. It was a new environment, and I didn't understand it. Without such networks, I wouldn't have made it. (Enhle)

The statements below from Vuyelwa, Anele, Lindelwa, Gugulethu, Jabulile, Sindi, and Ntobeko emphasise the crucial role of support systems and mentorship in the professional development of African Black female leaders. Vuyelwa noted that mentorship provided the essential guidance and support she needed to navigate complex roles, while Anele emphasised the value of having a trusted advisor who believes in one's potential and pushes for growth. Lindelwa, meanwhile, attributed her success to the foundation laid by her family's emphasis on education and hard work, complemented by mentors who provided a clear professional roadmap.

Gugulethu and Ntobeko both stressed the importance of supportive colleagues and professional networks that offer valuable perspectives, practical advice, and a sounding board for ideas, helping them to navigate the corporate landscape effectively. Jabulile and Sindi further illustrated the impact of mentorship on understanding corporate nuances and career advancement.

Jabulile noted that mentors help decode the unwritten rules of the corporate world and advocate on behalf of their mentees, while Sindi credited her mentors with providing strategic advice and advocating for her in the boardroom, which has been instrumental in her career progression.

Support systems are critical. Without the mentorship I received, I wouldn't have been able to navigate the complexities of my role. They provided guidance and support when I needed it the most. (Vuyelwa)

Mentorship has played a significant role in my career. Having someone who believes in you and pushes you to reach your potential is invaluable. It's about having that trusted advisor to guide you. (Anele)

The support from my family, especially my parents, who emphasised the importance of education and hard work, laid the foundation for my success. Mentors in my professional life provided the roadmap. (Lindelwa)

Having a network of supportive colleagues and mentors has been a lifeline. They offer perspectives and advice that help me navigate the corporate landscape. (Gugulethu)

Mentorship has been crucial in helping me understand the unwritten rules of the corporate world. It's about having someone in your corner who can advocate for you. (Jabulile)

My mentors have provided me with strategic advice and have been my advocates in the boardroom. Their support has been instrumental in my career progression. (Sindi)

The support from my professional network has been invaluable. They provide a sounding board for ideas and offer practical advice on navigating challenges. (Ntobeko)

These statements further highlight that robust support systems and mentorship are critical for overcoming challenges, gaining strategic insights, and achieving professional excellence in the face of systemic biases and complexities in the corporate environment.

5.3.3 Pathways to leadership

This theme highlights the diverse and often challenging routes taken by African Black female leaders to reach a leadership position. The participants' experiences revealed diverse paths and strategies for career advancement, shaped by a mix of personal and professional decisions. Each leader's journey highlights the significance of determination, strategic networking, mentorship and specific development programmes that aided their progression.

Determination was a key driver, enabling these leaders to overcome various challenges. Through strategic networking, they built essential connections, gained visibility, and accessed unique opportunities outside conventional channels. Mentorship provided critical support, offering guidance and inspiration to navigate their professional landscapes. Development programmes further equipped them with the skills and knowledge necessary for success.

These elements formed a common thread in their career stories, although their journeys were rarely straightforward. Most of the participants did not follow a linear path to leadership; instead, they advanced by navigating unconventional routes, overcoming systemic barriers, and seizing unique opportunities. Their narratives emphasise the importance of resilience, adaptability, and the ability to leverage distinctive opportunities, illustrating the complex and dynamic nature of leadership development.

The majority of the participants attributed their entry into their current leadership roles to networks and recommendations; very few attributed their entry to traditional recruitment processes. Anele embarked on her career using the traditional approach:

I applied on P-Net and was picked up by a recruiter who interviewed me for the position. It was a straightforward process, but the competition was tough. (Anele)

While Londi's journey was profoundly influenced by mentorship:

Through a mentorship programme, I was able to gain insights and opportunities that led to my current role. (Londi)

The guidance and opportunities provided to the participants by their mentors were critical, as they offered not just advice and support, but also access to the networks and resources that would otherwise have been inaccessible. These mentors, who were often experienced professionals in the participants' fields, helped them to navigate the complexities of the corporate environment, provided valuable insights into leadership and strategic decision-making, and served as role models.

The following participants leveraged professional referrals to achieve success:

I didn't feel like selling myself to people. I was at a point where I knew enough to understand that I didn't want to be where I was. However, I hadn't planned out where I wanted to be. Long story short, I ended up having a coffee with my current boss, and, 30 minutes later, I decided to go for it. Then I met the CEO, and that was it. (Ntobeko)

It was somebody I had worked with, I used to work at Company X, so I used to work with this other lady, when she left company X we used to share a lot obviously, and she knew our own frustrations even though we were happy. She knew that if I've got something that was more financially rewarding, I would consider moving... she recommended me. So certainly, I think it was definitely a high recommendation from her end. It was from a relationship perspective, and from a work ethic perspective, because we worked together for a bit. (Londi)

A former colleague referred me, which opened doors I wouldn't have accessed otherwise. So I've been very fortunate that people that a person I reported to rehired me. (Lindiwe)

...another Black female who had worked with me before, though not in the same team but in the same organisation, gave me a call. She said, 'Listen, there's a role here. I know

you're busy with your own business and you probably want to come, let's do it together. You can still keep your business and spend time with your kids because I know that's important to you. But come and work for me because I need a strategist to solve some business issues'. That's how I got into the job that I'm in now. (Phaphama)

I was recommended for my current position by the chairperson of the board. Although I went through the interview process, having someone vouch for me made a significant difference. It opened doors that would have otherwise been closed. (Sindi)

I was recruited through my professional network, which had been built over years of working in the industry. (Qondisile)

The lady I used to report to, left my previous organisation and joined another one as the group executive. When the role I currently hold became available, she reached out to me because she knew I always preferred a generalist role over a specialist one. (Lindelwa)

The statements from Ntobeko, Londi, Lindiwe, Phaphama, and Sindi highlight the importance of relationships and networking in career advancement, contrasting with traditional recruitment methods. Ntobeko's story emphasises the power of informal connections and serendipitous meetings in career transitions. Her unplanned yet impactful conversation with her current boss led to a career shift without the typical structured job search. This shows that personal rapport and informal interactions can sometimes bypass traditional recruitment processes, providing opportunities that may not be available through conventional methods of talent searching or recruitment.

Londi and Lindiwe's experiences emphasise the role of recommendations and referrals from former colleagues and professional relationships. Londi's transition was facilitated by a former colleague who understood her frustrations and potential, showcasing the importance of personal relationships and work ethic in opening new doors. Similarly, Lindiwe's referral by a former colleague enabled her to access opportunities she might not have found otherwise. These insights reveal that trusted recommendations and past professional relationships can significantly influence recruitment, often providing an edge over candidates who rely solely on standard application processes.

Phaphama and Sindi's quotes further illustrate the significance of endorsements from trusted individuals in securing new roles. Phaphama was approached by a former colleague who knew her personal priorities and professional capabilities, leading to a role that accommodated her needs while leveraging her strategic skills. Sindi's appointment was facilitated by the chairperson of the board's recommendation, highlighting the weight of endorsements from influential figures. These stories juxtapose the effectiveness of relational and network-based

recruitment methods against traditional approaches, underlining how personal connections and endorsements can create unique and advantageous opportunities in the professional landscape.

This nuance, however, perpetuates the continuous discrimination that African Black females face in corporate recruitment processes due to insufficient representation. Without adequate representation, there are fewer advocates and sponsors within the organisation to recommend and support them. The lack of representation means that African Black females often lack the crucial endorsements and networks that can facilitate career advancement, creating a significant barrier to accessing leadership roles.

The reality is that leadership often recommends and advocates for individuals within their existing circles, perpetuating a cycle of filling leadership positions predominantly with White females, White males, and Black males. This entrenched network effect results in African Black females being overlooked and marginalised in recruitment and promotion processes. Consequently, without intentional efforts to diversify and include African Black females in these circles, the cycle of exclusion continues, maintaining the status quo and hindering progress towards true inclusivity in corporate leadership.

5.3.4 *Balancing work and personal life*

Balancing professional responsibilities with a personal life, especially family responsibilities, was a significant challenge mentioned by many participants. This theme explores the impact of these dual roles and the strategies used to manage them. Balancing work and a personal life is a critical issue for African Black female leaders, who often face additional pressures due to cultural expectations and family responsibilities. The theme highlights the struggle to maintain an equilibrium between professional obligations and personal commitments. The participants described the emotional and physical toll of juggling these roles and the coping mechanisms they employ.

Balancing work and family responsibilities has been a constant challenge. As a mother, the guilt of not being present for my children while trying to excel at work is always there. It's a delicate balance that requires constant adjustment. (Bandile)

I've found that having a supportive network, both at home and at work, makes a huge difference. My partner and family help a lot with the kids, which allows me to focus on my career when I need to. I try to set clear boundaries between work and personal time, but it's not always easy. Sometimes work demands spill over into personal time, and vice versa. (Anele)

Anele's tone of voice changed as she mentioned this, indicating the sore point that is the term "work-life balance" for her.

Balancing work and personal life has been a constant challenge, especially being a mother. The demands of my job often spill over into my personal time, making it hard to switch off and be present for my family. (Sindi)

Running my own business and working full-time means my work-life balance is almost non-existent. I try to make up for it by spending quality time with my children whenever I can, but it's tough. (Phaphama)

Before joining company X, I was with company Y, and managing my work and personal life was a balancing act. My family has always been supportive, but the constant travel and long hours made it difficult to be present at home. Work-life balance is a myth... (Linda)

The support from my family, especially my partner, has been crucial in managing work-life balance. They take on a lot of the household responsibilities, which allows me to focus on my career. (Simpfiwe)

Maintaining a work-life balance is difficult in my position. The expectations are high, and there's always more work to do. I try to set boundaries, but it's a constant struggle. (Khanya)

Having a supportive network, both at home and at work, makes a huge difference. My partner and family help a lot with the kids, which allows me to focus on my career when I need to. (Mwali)

The insights drawn from these statements highlight the persistent challenge of balancing work and a personal life, particularly for women in leadership roles. Bandile and Anele's reflections emphasise the constant guilt and emotional strain of not being fully present for their children due to professional responsibilities. This guilt highlights a broader societal expectation for women to excel in both their careers and family roles, leading to an ongoing internal conflict and the need for continuous adjustment and resilience.

The experiences of Sindi and Phaphama further illustrate the difficulties of maintaining a work-life balance when job demands intrude on personal time. Sindi noted the difficulty in switching off from work, which affects her ability to be present with her family. Phaphama, who runs her own business and works full-time, described her work-life balance as almost non-existent, highlighting the extreme pressures faced by entrepreneurial women who juggle multiple roles. These narratives reflect a common issue where professional commitments overshadow personal life, leading to burnout and stress.

Linda and Khanya's insights revealed that high job expectations and constant travel significantly strain their ability to manage personal and family responsibilities. Despite having supportive families, the relentless work demands make it challenging to maintain a presence at home. This scenario is indicative of many professional women who, despite robust support

systems, find it difficult to achieve a healthy balance due to the nature of their work environments and the expectations placed upon them.

Simphiwe and Mbali underscored the critical role of supportive networks in managing a work-life balance. Simphiwe credited her partner and family for taking on household responsibilities, enabling her to focus on her career. Similarly, Mbali acknowledged the significant difference that having a supportive network at home and work makes, allowing her to prioritise her career when necessary. These statements highlight that while personal support systems can alleviate some of the pressures, the challenge of work-life balance remains a significant issue.

The emotional toll of not being present for one's family, the intrusion of work into one's personal life, and the high expectations of professional roles contribute to a complex dynamic that requires continuous negotiation and support. This emphasises the need for more flexible work environments, societal recognition of these challenges, and robust support systems to help women achieve a more sustainable balance between their professional and personal lives.

5.3.5 Leadership styles and personal resilience

This theme examines the leadership styles of African Black female leaders, emphasising inclusivity, empathy, and resilience. The participants described how their personal experiences and challenges have shaped their approach to leadership, with leadership styles among African Black female leaders often being characterised by inclusivity, empathy, and resilience. These leaders adopt a collaborative approach, valuing input from their teams and fostering a supportive environment. Their personal resilience, honed through overcoming various challenges, informs their leadership philosophy. They prioritise creating an inclusive workplace where diversity is celebrated and everyone feels valued. This theme reflects their commitment to leading with empathy and understanding, drawing from their own experiences of adversity.

My experiences have taught me that leadership is about more than just giving orders. It's about listening, understanding, and empowering others to reach their potential. Being a good leader means being adaptable and open to learning from those around you. Growing up in a community-oriented environment, I learned the importance of empathy and community support, which I now incorporate into my leadership style. (Sindi)

Leadership to me is about being a role model and setting a positive example. My experiences have shown me that integrity and transparency are crucial. I believe in leading by example and being accountable for my actions. Coming from a background where integrity was highly valued, I strive to uphold those values in my professional life, fostering a culture of trust and honesty within my team. (Phaphama)

Through my career, I've learned that leadership is about service. It's about serving your team, your organisation, and your community. Good leaders prioritise the well-being and development of their team members. My background in a service-oriented family has deeply influenced my approach to leadership, emphasising the importance of service and support in professional settings. (Linda)

Leadership is a journey of continuous learning. My experiences have shown me that no leader has all the answers. It's important to stay humble, seek feedback, and constantly strive to improve. Growing up, education and learning were always emphasised, and this has ingrained in me the value of continuous improvement and humility in leadership. (Bandile)

My leadership style has been shaped by the need to be inclusive and empathetic. I've learned that understanding the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of my team members is key to fostering a collaborative and productive work environment. Coming from a diverse community, I understand the importance of inclusivity and empathy, which I bring into my leadership approach. (Simpfiwe)

Leadership is about vision and direction. My experiences have taught me the importance of having a clear vision and communicating it effectively to inspire and motivate others. My background in a goal-oriented family has helped me develop a strong sense of direction and the ability to articulate and pursue my vision effectively. (Jabulile)

I've learned that effective leadership requires resilience and perseverance. There will always be challenges and setbacks, but a good leader stays focused on the goals and keeps pushing forward. Growing up facing numerous challenges has instilled in me the resilience needed to lead and inspire my team to overcome obstacles. (Vuyelwa)

Leadership is about making tough decisions and being accountable for them. My experiences have taught me that it's important to stand by your decisions and take responsibility for the outcomes, whether they are positive or negative. (Khanya)

For me, leadership is about trust and respect. My experiences have shown me that building trust with your team is essential for effective leadership. It's important to be trustworthy and to respect the contributions of each team member. (Ntobeko)

Leadership is about empowerment. I've learned that empowering others to take ownership of their work leads to better outcomes and a more engaged team. It's important to delegate and trust your team. (Mbali)

The participants' statements about their leadership styles highlight the key leadership style themes seen in Table 10 below.

Table 10. Key leadership style themes

Theme	Description
Empathy and Inclusivity	Participants like Simphiwe emphasised the importance of understanding diverse backgrounds and fostering a collaborative environment. Empathy is seen as crucial in creating a supportive and productive team dynamic.
Continuous Learning and Adaptability	Bandile and Sindi highlighted the significance of continuous learning and being open to feedback. Adaptability is crucial for effective leadership, allowing leaders to grow and improve continually.
Integrity and Accountability	Phaphama and Khanya noted the importance of integrity, transparency, and accountability in leadership. Leading by example and taking responsibility for decisions are fundamental aspects of their leadership styles.
Service and Support	Linda's leadership style focuses on serving her team and prioritising their well-being and development. This service-oriented approach is aimed at fostering a supportive and growth-focused environment.
Vision and Direction	Jabulile stressed the importance of having a clear vision and effectively communicating it to inspire and motivate others. A strong sense of direction helps guide the team towards common goals.
Resilience and Perseverance	Vuyelwa's experiences highlight the need for resilience and perseverance in leadership. Overcoming challenges and maintaining focus on goals are essential traits for effective leaders.
Trust and Respect	Ntobeko emphasised building trust and respect within the team. Trustworthiness and respect for team members' contributions are crucial for effective leadership.
Empowerment	Mbali's leadership style focuses on empowering team members to take ownership of their work. Delegation and trust are key components in fostering a more engaged and motivated team.

These insights reflect the diverse yet overlapping approaches to leadership, shaped by the participants' unique experiences and backgrounds.

The leadership styles observed among the participants are characterised by a strong emphasis on empathy, inclusivity, continuous learning, integrity, accountability, service, support, vision, resilience, and empowerment. These styles reflect a leadership approach that prioritises understanding diverse backgrounds, fostering collaborative environments, and promoting a culture of learning and ethical behaviour. Participants like Simphiwe highlighted the importance of inclusivity and empathy, including ensuring that team members felt understood

and valued. Bandile and Sindi, meanwhile, emphasised the need for continuous learning and adaptability, which are crucial for personal and professional growth in leadership roles.

Personal resilience was a recurring theme, with participants demonstrating the ability to navigate challenges and setbacks with perseverance and determination. Vuyelwa's experiences highlighted the necessity of resilience in leadership, especially in overcoming obstacles and maintaining a focus on long-term goals. This resilience is often based on personal experiences and backgrounds, as seen in Phaphama and Khanya's emphases on integrity and accountability, which are deeply rooted in their upbringing and professional journeys.

The leadership attributes typically associated with men in corporate settings emphasise assertiveness, decisiveness, and strategic thinking. These attributes are commonly seen as aligning with traditional perceptions of strong leadership, however the participants in this study demonstrate that effective leadership encompasses a broader set of qualities. Empathy and inclusivity, as emphasised by Simphiwe, challenge the notion that leadership is solely about authority and control. Continuous learning and adaptability, highlighted by Bandile and Sindi, illustrate that growth and flexibility are essential for modern leadership, in contrast with the often static perception of traditional leadership attributes.

Integrity and accountability, as underscored by Phaphama and Khanya, show that ethical leadership and transparency are vital for building trust and credibility, diverging from the sometimes cut-throat tactics attributed to stereotypical corporate leaders. Service and support, emphasised by Linda, and empowerment, highlighted by Mbali, reflect a servant leadership model that prioritises the development and well-being of team members over hierarchical dominance.

These findings further highlight African Black female leaders' rich and multifaceted approach to leadership. This approach contrasts with and complements the traditional leadership attributes often associated with men. By integrating empathy, continuous learning, integrity, and a service-oriented mindset, these leaders are reshaping the narrative of what effective leadership looks like, highlighting the importance of resilience and support systems in overcoming the unique challenges they face in corporate environments.

5.3.6 Navigating male-dominated environments

All the participants shared their experiences of working in male-dominated sectors and the associated challenges that accompany this, highlighting that workplaces in South Africa are

still very male dominated. This theme delves into the strategies the participants use to navigate these spaces, such as asserting their authority, building strong professional networks, and continuously proving their competence. The experiences shared by the participants highlight the need for resilience, confidence, and strategic thinking to overcome biases and establish their presence in these environments.

One of the most common strategies mentioned was the need to assert authority to be taken seriously. For instance, some participants highlighted the importance of asserting their authority to ensure their contributions are valued:

I've learned to assert my authority and ensure my contributions are valued. Navigating a male-dominated environment means constantly proving my worth and resilience. (Sindi)

As a Black woman in a male-dominated field, I've had to continuously validate my competence. It's an ongoing struggle to be seen and heard. (Simphiwe)

The other leaders echoed this sentiment, discussing the constant effort required to gain respect in their environments where they were often the only African Black woman:

Being the only woman in many meetings, I had to work twice as hard to gain respect. It's a constant battle to be taken seriously and have my ideas heard. (Phaphama)

Working in a predominantly male environment, I face challenges that require me to assert my authority regularly. Building professional relationships helps navigate these biases. (Bandile)

I've had to develop strategies to assert my authority in male-dominated spaces. Building confidence and resilience has been crucial in overcoming challenges. (Vuyelwa)

Building strong professional relationships emerged as another critical strategy. Linda emphasised how these relationships helped her overcome biases:

"In the male-dominated industry I work in, building strong professional relationships has been key to overcoming biases. It's about resilience and confidence. (Linda)

Bandile, Funeka and Gugulethu also noted the importance of professional relationships in navigating biases:

Working in a predominantly male environment, I face challenges that require me to assert my authority regularly. Building professional relationships helps navigate these biases. (Bandile)

In a male-dominated industry, I've had to learn to assert my authority and build strong professional relationships to overcome biases. (Funeka)

Being in a male-dominated environment, I constantly work on validating my competence. It's about resilience and building strong professional networks. (Gugulethu)

Navigating male-dominated environments presents unique challenges for African Black female leaders, who often find themselves having to prove their competence and assert their authority

to be taken seriously. The need to continuously validate their abilities is a common thread, as highlighted by participants like Simphiwe, who described this as an ongoing struggle to be seen and heard. This persistent effort to gain recognition underscores the additional burdens placed on these leaders compared to their peers, and their stories highlight the relentless need for resilience and confidence in such environments.

Vuyelwa spoke about developing strategies to assert her authority, which required building confidence and resilience. Similarly, Khanya emphasised the need for continuous validation of her competence and the effort it took to overcome biases. Their experiences show that resilience is not just about enduring challenges, but also about actively pushing back against them.

Building strong professional relationships emerged as a crucial strategy for overcoming biases and gaining support. Linda and Bandile both pointed out the importance of these networks in navigating a male-dominated industry. These relationships provide not only emotional support but also practical benefits, helping them to navigate challenges and assert their presence more effectively. These networks further help to mitigate the isolating effects of working in male-dominated environments, providing a sense of community and shared purpose. Through these strategies, African Black female leaders navigate the complexities of their professional landscapes, asserting their authority and proving their worth in the face of persistent challenges.

5.3.7 Influence of upbringing and education

The participants frequently mentioned how their upbringing and education shaped their career paths and leadership styles. This theme explored the impact of family values, educational background, and early life experiences on the interviewees' professional journeys. Upbringing and education play a significant role in shaping the career paths and leadership styles of African Black female leaders; the participants often credited their resilience and work ethic to the values instilled by their families. Their educational backgrounds also provided a foundation for their professional development, equipping them with the skills and confidence needed to navigate corporate environments.

My background includes being raised in Mamelodi by my grandmother who supported us by selling illegal homemade alcohol. Despite the challenges, she instilled the importance of education as a key to success and self-reliance. (Lindiwe)

Growing up, my parents taught me the value of hard work and perseverance. These lessons have been crucial in shaping my career path and leadership style. (Phaphama)

Linda shared how some of the experiences she had growing up negatively affected her as a child. Being the only Black girl in her primary school class and not having the same privileges as her White friends was challenging. When sleepovers were arranged, she could not participate because her house was not in the suburbs. She remembers her parents not being able to afford many of the things her White friends had, and she was determined to use her intelligence to level the playing field for herself.

My background as much as it affected me, it propelled me to do better. I live a life of trying to show that I am equally capable. I have the same brains like everybody else if given something to work with. My upbringing was centered around the belief that you must always strive for excellence. This has driven me to continuously improve and seek higher education to advance my career. (Linda)

The influence of upbringing and education on the participants' career paths and leadership styles is profound. Lindiwe's story highlights how her grandmother, despite supporting the family through the sale of illegal homemade alcohol, instilled in her the importance of education as a key to success and self-reliance. This focus on education amidst challenging circumstances provided Lindiwe with the determination to overcome her environment and strive for a better future.

Phaphama's parents emphasised the value of hard work and perseverance – lessons that have been crucial in shaping her career and leadership style, while the values of education and integrity have been guiding principles for Bandile throughout her career. These values, instilled by her family, have provided a foundation for her professional development. Vuyelwa also spoke to the resilience and work ethic she learnt during her upbringing, which have become integral to her leadership style; these early lessons have shaped how she approaches her role and interacts with her team.

Khanya and Simphiwe's reflections reveal how a supportive family environment that valued education became a cornerstone of their careers. Khanya highlighted the resilience and work ethic taught by her family, while Simphiwe emphasised how the values of education and hard work shaped her approach to leadership, guiding her decisions and actions.

Anele and Thandeka illustrated the profound impact of their upbringing on their professional development. Anele noted that growing up in a family that emphasised education and perseverance was instrumental in her career, teaching her the importance of hard work and resilience. Thandeka shared a similar sentiment, reflecting on how her rural upbringing instilled

in her the value of resilience and hard work, with a strong focus on education driving her career forward.

The values instilled in me by my family, particularly the importance of education and integrity, have guided me throughout my career. (Bandile)

My upbringing taught me the value of hard work and resilience. Coming from a family that valued education, I always knew I had to strive for excellence. These values have shaped my leadership style. (Vuyelwa)

My upbringing in a supportive family environment where education was valued has been a cornerstone of my career. It taught me resilience and the importance of hard work. (Khanya)

The values instilled in me by my family, particularly the emphasis on education and hard work, have shaped my approach to leadership. These values guide my decisions and actions. (Simpfiwe)

Growing up in a family that emphasised education and perseverance has been instrumental in my career. My parents instilled in me the importance of hard work and resilience. (Anele)

My upbringing in a rural area taught me the importance of resilience and hard work. My parents emphasised education, and that focus has been a driving force in my career. (Thandeka)

Growing up in a community that valued education and perseverance has been instrumental in my career. These values have shaped my approach to leadership and resilience. (Jabulile)

Overall, the participants' backgrounds provided them with a strong foundation of values centred on education, hard work, and resilience. These principles have not only guided their career paths but also influenced their leadership styles, enabling them to navigate and excel in their professional environments.

5.3.8 *Striving for excellence and recognition*

A recurring theme was the drive to excel and achieve recognition in the face of numerous challenges. This theme explores the motivations and pressures that drive participants to pursue excellence, which is a common thread among African Black female leaders. This theme delves into the motivations behind their pursuit of excellence, which often stems from a desire to overcome stereotypes and prove their worth. The pressures to perform at a higher standard are immense, but these leaders view excellence as a pathway to breaking barriers and gaining the recognition they deserve.

Striving for excellence has always been my way of survival. There's an expectation to perform and deliver at a higher standard, which can be exhausting but necessary. It's a way to ensure recognition. (Dumazile)

In my industry, I've had to work harder to prove myself. It's about excellence and ensuring that my work speaks for itself. The pressure to excel is constant. (Qondisile)

Corporate South Africa wants to stifle growth. They are afraid of what we can achieve. So striving for excellence is a way to prove that we belong and can excel. It's about showing them our capabilities. (Khanya)

Achieving excellence means constantly pushing myself to do better and be better, despite the obstacles. It's about setting high standards and meeting them. (Funeka)

Excellence is non-negotiable. It's the only way to ensure that my contributions are recognised and valued. The drive to excel is a constant motivation. (Gugulethu)

Excellence is the benchmark I set for myself. It's about breaking stereotypes and proving that I belong in the spaces I occupy. The drive to excel is a significant part of my journey. (Bandile)

The pursuit of excellence is about proving that I am capable and worthy of my position. It's about setting a high standard and striving to meet it every day. (Simpfiwe)

Excellence is the way to break barriers and change perceptions. It's about demonstrating that I am more than capable and deserving of my role. (Anele)

Striving for excellence is a way to challenge the biases and stereotypes I face. It's about showing that I am more than qualified and capable of excelling in my field. (Thandeka)

The recurring theme of striving for excellence among African Black female leaders highlights a profound drive to overcome challenges and achieve recognition in their professional environments. This drive is often rooted in the need to validate their capabilities and assert their presence in industries where they are often underrepresented and undervalued. Dumazile's reflection on the expectation to perform at a higher standard encapsulates the exhausting yet necessary effort to ensure recognition. The relentless pursuit of excellence is a survival strategy; a way to stand out and be acknowledged.

Qondisile's experience underscores the constant pressure to prove herself in her industry. The need to work harder and let the quality of work speak for itself is a testament to the pervasive challenges these leaders face. This pursuit of excellence is not just a personal goal but a professional necessity, driving them to continuously push their boundaries and excel beyond expectations.

Khanya's statement highlights a broader systemic issue in corporate South Africa, where growth is often stifled by institutional biases. For her, striving for excellence is a form of resistance; a way to prove that she belongs and can excel despite the systemic barriers. This sentiment was echoed by Funeka, who views the pursuit of excellence as a means to overcome obstacles and set high standards, continually pushing herself to achieve and be better.

For Gugulethu, excellence is non-negotiable and serves as a constant motivation to ensure that her contributions are recognised and valued. This determination was mirrored by Bandile, who set excellence as her benchmark to break stereotypes and prove her worth in the spaces she occupies. Their pursuit of excellence is deeply intertwined with their identities and experiences, shaping their professional journeys and leadership styles.

Simphiwe and Anele both emphasised that excellence is about proving their capabilities and breaking barriers; it is a daily effort to set and meet high standards, challenging biases and changing perceptions. Thandeka added that striving for excellence is a way to demonstrate that she is more than qualified and capable of excelling in her field. This drive is not only about personal achievement, but also about challenging and reshaping the narratives that surround African Black female leaders in their respective industries.

The pursuit of excellence among these leaders is driven by a combination of personal ambition and the need to overcome systemic biases. It is a way to validate their capabilities, gain recognition, and assert their presence in male-dominated and often biased environments. This relentless drive to excel is a powerful force that shapes their professional journeys, leadership styles, and the broader impact they have in their fields.

5.3.9 Authority and empowerment

The experiences of feeling empowered or disempowered in their roles were a common theme, which explores how the participants have experienced authority and empowerment in their leadership positions. Authority and empowerment are crucial aspects of leadership, yet African Black female leaders often face challenges in asserting their authority and feeling empowered. This theme reflects the interviewees' strategies to assert themselves and the importance of organisational support in fostering empowerment.

At times, I feel undermined when my suggestions are not taken seriously in meetings, especially when male colleagues echo the same ideas and get credited for them. (Sindi)

There are moments when I don't feel I have complete decision-making power. Often, my decisions are questioned more rigorously compared to my male counterparts. (Phaphama)

Feeling undermined is a common experience, especially in meetings where my inputs are overlooked. (Mbali)

In my experience, I often have to defend my decisions more vigorously than my male colleagues. (Funeka)

There are occasions where my suggestions are not taken seriously until they are echoed by male colleagues. (Thandeka)

My decisions are often scrutinised more than those of my male counterparts, which can be frustrating. (Qondisile)

Being the only Black female in my department, I often feel my decisions are not given the same weight as those of my colleagues. (Lindiwe)

My decisions are sometimes not taken seriously until they are confirmed by male colleagues. (Bongiwe)

The above experiences in the workplace highlight a common yet deeply frustrating phenomenon for many women, particularly African Black female leaders. They described moments where their suggestions were dismissed or ignored in meetings, only to have the same ideas later echoed by male colleagues who then receive the credit. This situation not only undermines their authority and contributions, but also perpetuates a culture where women's voices are marginalised. The act of being silenced and having one's ideas appropriated by others also underscores the gender and racial biases that persist in corporate environments. Notably, these experiences highlight the intersectionality of both gender and race working against this group.

I do feel undermined occasionally, especially when my strategic decisions are second-guessed or need extra validation. (Simphiwe)

Being undermined happens, particularly in high-stakes projects where my judgment is often questioned more than that of my peers. (Jabulile)

I've experienced instances where my decisions were overridden without consultation, which undermines my leadership. (Vuyelwa)

There are times when I have to fight harder to have my decisions respected and implemented. (Ntobeko)

There are times when my contributions are dismissed or overlooked, which undermines my leadership. (Tshegofatso)

Many of the participants expressed feeling undermined as leaders, particularly in meetings where their suggestions are dismissed or ignored. In big projects, they often have to work double time to prove their decision-making capabilities. This indicates a systemic issue of gender and racial biases, and highlights the extra effort required by African Black female leaders to assert their authority and gain recognition for their contributions.

Over and above having experiences of feeling undermined, this group of African Black female leaders tacitly expressed their leadership challenges.

Balancing the expectations of my role while trying to prove my worth constantly is one of my biggest challenges. (Sindi)

Navigating organisational politics and ensuring my team gets the recognition it deserves is a significant challenge. (Phaphama)

My biggest challenge is overcoming the biases and stereotypes that come with being a Black female leader. (Linda)

Ensuring that my decisions are respected and followed through without being second-guessed is a major challenge. (Bandile)

Breaking through the glass ceiling and ensuring equal opportunities for my team is a significant challenge. (Khanya)

Combating systemic biases and ensuring my leadership style is respected are ongoing challenges. (Ntobeko)

Dealing with the extra scrutiny and pressure to perform at a higher standard is a constant challenge. (Funeka)

Breaking through stereotypes and ensuring my leadership is respected is a significant challenge. (Lindiwe)

Maintaining respect and authority in a predominantly male environment is a significant challenge. (Bongiwe)

Navigating organisational politics is another major challenge. Phaphama and others highlighted the complexities of ensuring their teams receive due recognition while managing internal dynamics. The need to advocate for their teams in environments where biases and stereotypes persist requires strategic acumen and resilience. Leaders must constantly balance these dynamics while striving to maintain their credibility and authority, which can be particularly taxing in male-dominated spaces.

Overcoming biases and stereotypes was a recurring theme among the participants. Linda and Bandile emphasised their ongoing struggle to break down the biases associated with Black female leaders, which affect their professional interactions and impact their ability to lead effectively. Overcoming these stereotypes requires continuous effort and resilience, as they must consistently prove their capabilities and expertise to their peers and superiors.

Maintaining credibility and authority in male-dominated environments is another significant challenge. Participants like Simphiwe and Jabulile discussed the difficulty of being seen and heard in spaces where their leadership is often questioned. This challenge is compounded by the need to constantly validate their competence and expertise, which can lead to feelings of frustration and demotivation. Ensuring that their contributions are recognised and valued requires a persistent effort to assert their authority and demonstrate their worth.

5.3.10 Coping strategies

This theme explores the methods the participants employ to maintain resilience and well-being in the face of adversity, such as building strong support networks, engaging in self-care

practices, and maintaining a positive outlook. These strategies help them manage stress, overcome obstacles, and continue to perform effectively in their roles.

I focus on my work and let it speak for itself. If someone has a problem with my gender or race, it's their problem, not mine. This mind-set helps me stay focused and resilient.
(Wandisa)

Wandisa's approach emphasises focusing on her work and letting it speak for itself, demonstrating a strong sense of self-assurance and resilience. By adopting the mind-set that biases related to gender and race are the problem of others, she maintains her focus and determination, ensuring that external negativity does not derail her efforts.

Building strong networks and participating in professional organisations have been crucial. These networks provide support and a sense of community. They help me stay grounded and motivated. (Linda)

Linda's strategy involves building strong networks and participating in professional organisations. These networks offer support and a sense of community, helping her stay grounded and motivated. This communal approach provides a vital support system that enhances her professional journey, reinforcing the importance of collective strength and shared experiences.

Resilience is key. I've learned to stay focused on my goals and not let the biases and challenges deter me from achieving them. It's about maintaining a positive outlook.
(Enhle)

Enhle highlighted the significance of resilience and maintaining a positive outlook. By staying focused on her goals and not allowing biases to deter her, she emphasises the importance of mental strength. This resilience is key to overcoming challenges and staying on course, demonstrating a proactive approach to personal and professional development.

I meditate regularly. I pray. I spend time with my family. I run a lot. Exercise is a big thing for me. I try to make time for myself. That's how I cope. It helps me keep my sanity.
(Gugulethu)

Gugulethu combines various activities to maintain her well-being, including meditation, prayer, family time, and exercise. These practices help her manage stress and maintain her sanity, showcasing a holistic approach to coping that balances mental, physical, and emotional health.

I deal with the disrespect and hard work by focusing on excellence, putting in extra hours, and ensuring my work is of the highest standard. And yes, sometimes I unwind with a glass of wine at the end of a stressful day. (Simpfiwe)

How I cope, I surround myself with people who are able to give me support, where we are able to talk about things that affect us as women leaders and how to deal with them. That keeps me going. (Phaphama)

How do I cope? I don't. I just push on. You get to a point where you just continue and push on because that's what you do. You keep moving. (Bandile)

I cope by being strong for myself and for others. I keep reminding myself why I am here and what my purpose is. It keeps me grounded and focused. (Funeka)

Travelling during holidays recharges me. Exploring new places and cultures is refreshing and rejuvenating. (Qophelo)

Qophelo finds rejuvenation in travelling during holidays. Exploring new places and cultures provides her with a refreshing break from routine, allowing her to recharge and return to her responsibilities with renewed energy.

I find solace in my hobbies. Painting and gardening help me disconnect from work and reduce stress. (Cebisile)

Cebisile finds solace in her hobbies, such as painting and gardening. These activities help her disconnect from work and reduce stress, underscoring the importance of having personal interests that provide relaxation and mental relief.

I cope by praying, staying close to my family, and reminding myself why I do what I do. My faith and my family are my pillars. (Thandeka)

My faith and spirituality provide me with strength and resilience. Regular prayers and attending religious gatherings help me cope. (Mbali)

Thandeka and Mbali rely on prayer, family, and faith as their pillars of support. These elements provide them with strength and resilience, demonstrating the significant role that spiritual and family support plays in their ability to cope with stress.

I ensure to have a robust social life. Meeting friends and participating in social activities keeps me balanced. (Linda)

Linda's balance between work and social interactions helps her stay balanced and prevents burnout, emphasising the need for a well-rounded life that includes social engagement. There was a common signalling of cupping your hand to indicate drinking, amongst some of the participants, but this was not tacitly expressed because of the negative connotations attached to alcohol, especially for Black women. This was noted in the diary as it could not be captured in the interview transcripts.

These varied coping strategies reflect the complex nature of managing stress and maintaining resilience in leadership roles. Each approach provides valuable insights into how African Black female leaders navigate their unique challenges and thrive in their professional journeys.

5.3.11 *Ideal leadership experiences*

This theme explores their aspirations and the conditions necessary for effective leadership. Ideal leadership experiences for African Black female leaders involve environments where their contributions are valued, and they are provided with equal opportunities and support. This theme reflects their aspirations for a workplace that recognises and nurtures their potential, and fosters an inclusive culture where diversity is celebrated. The participants emphasised the importance of having the resources, autonomy, and recognition to lead effectively, and reflected on their ideal leadership styles as well as what they aspire to do as leaders. Sometimes this was shared with smiles, and in other cases, with looks of sorrow, as the interviewees recognised that their reality is often the opposite. The participants spoke with conviction as they make conscious efforts to provide the ideal experiences about which they spoke.

Having a leader who is adaptive and open to change is essential. They should be able to navigate through uncertainties and guide their team with confidence and clarity. Flexibility in leadership is key to overcoming challenges. (Londi)

Londi explained that leaders should be able to navigate uncertainties confidently and clearly. Flexibility is essential in overcoming challenges, suggesting that the best leaders are those who can respond dynamically to evolving circumstances.

An ideal leadership experience for me is one where there is mutual respect and trust. A leader who empowers their team and provides opportunities for growth and development creates a positive and productive work environment. (Bandile)

Bandile believes that an ideal leader empowers their team and provides growth opportunities, fostering a positive and productive work environment. The underlying message is the importance of respect and empowerment in maintaining a healthy and motivated team.

An ideal leadership experience is one where the leader fosters a culture of collaboration and teamwork. They should encourage diverse perspectives and create an environment where everyone feels comfortable contributing their ideas. (Lindiwe)

Lindiwe highlighted the importance of inclusivity and openness in cultivating a supportive and innovative team culture.

Having a leader who understands the challenges faced by their team and offers support and guidance is crucial. An inclusive leader who promotes diversity and equality can make a significant impact on the overall morale and success of the organisation. (Cebisile)

Cebisile underscored the need for leaders who understand and support their team's challenges. Her tone emphasised empathy and the value of diverse, well-supported teams.

For me, an ideal leadership experience involves having a leader who encourages innovation and creativity. They should provide a safe space for employees to express their ideas and take calculated risks without fear of failure. (Funeka)

Funeka highlighted the importance of fostering an environment where creativity is valued and employees feel secure in exploring new ideas.

An ideal leader is someone who invests in their team's professional development. Providing mentorship and opportunities for continuous learning shows that the leader cares about their team's growth and success. (Hlengiwe)

Hlengiwe's ideal leader invests in their team's professional development, offering mentorship and continuous learning opportunities. This reflects a commitment to growth and success, indicating that leaders who care about their team's development are crucial for long-term organisational prosperity.

An ideal leadership experience involves having a leader who is approachable and open to feedback. They should create an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing their ideas and concerns without fear of retribution. (Phaphama)

An ideal leadership experience involves having a leader who is inspirational and motivating. They should lead by example and inspire their team to achieve their full potential. (Thandeka)

Phaphama and Thandeka underscored the need for open communication, psychological safety, and inspirational leadership to elevate team performance and morale, while Qophelo (below) highlighted the importance of respect and valuing diversity in leadership. Creating an inclusive work environment where everyone's contributions are recognised and appreciated is crucial.

A great leader is someone who is respectful and values diversity. They should create an inclusive work environment where everyone's contributions are recognised and appreciated. (Qophelo)

Overall, the participants' comments revealed a strong desire for leaders who are adaptable, respectful, supportive, inclusive, and inspirational. These qualities are seen as essential for creating a positive, productive, and motivating work environment where employees feel valued and empowered to contribute their best. The participants' insights provide a nuanced view of what makes an ideal leadership experience. The tone of their responses was hopeful and aspirational, with a subtle sense of longing for these qualities to be more prevalent in their work environments.

5.3.12 Intersectionality and identity

The theme of intersectionality and identity captures the complex and often challenging experiences faced by African Black female leaders due to the intersection of race, gender, and other aspects of their identity. For African Black women, race and gender are simultaneous processes of identity, leading them to encounter unique obstacles as they navigate professional spaces where they are often underrepresented and undervalued.

In sharing their experiences, the women never separated the challenges they faced as being solely due to their race or gender but rather to both. Despite these challenges, the intersectionality of race and gender can also provide African Black female leaders with unique perspectives that can be advantageous in leadership roles; their diverse experiences allow them to bring different viewpoints and solutions to the table, enriching the organisational culture and decision-making processes.

Being a Black woman in a leadership role means constantly proving that I deserve my seat at the table. It's exhausting, but I use it as fuel to push myself harder. (Anele)

My identity as a Black woman means I face double the scrutiny. I have to be twice as good to get half the recognition, but I refuse to let that hold me back. (Funeka)

This dual pressure from both racial and gender biases means that African Black female leaders are often scrutinised more intensely and have to work harder to gain the same level of respect and recognition as their counterparts.

Navigating a male-dominated environment as a Black woman has taught me resilience. I've had to learn how to assert myself and make sure my voice is heard. (Bandile)

Navigating biases as a Black woman in leadership requires a lot of mental strength. I've had to develop a thick skin and stay focused on my goals. (Jabulile)

Bandile and Jabulile's experience illustrates the necessity of resilience and assertiveness in overcoming the dual challenges posed by race and gender.

It's challenging to balance my identity as a Black woman and a leader. Sometimes, I feel like I have to choose between being true to myself and fitting into the corporate mold. (Cebisile)

Cebisile highlighted the internal conflict of maintaining her personal identity while conforming to corporate expectations.

The intersection of race and gender creates unique challenges. I often find myself being underestimated, but I've learned to use that underestimation to my advantage. (Dumazile)

Understanding my identity and how it influences my leadership style has been crucial. It allows me to navigate biases more effectively and advocate for myself and others. (Hlengiwe)

Identity awareness is key. Recognising how my race and gender influence my experiences helps me navigate the corporate world more effectively. (Lindiwe)

These quotes indicate that while dual identity can be a source of difficulty, it can also foster resilience and strategic thinking. There is also an awareness of the phenomenon of dual identity and instead of that holding the participant's back; it is used to build resilience and motivate them to keep moving forward. Self-awareness is key for these women to develop effective strategies for overcoming challenges, managing them proactively and advocating for others.

Being the only Black woman in many meetings, I have to navigate not just the gender dynamics but also the racial biases. It's a constant balancing act. (Enhle)

Enhle's experience points to the ongoing need to manage multiple layers of bias simultaneously, while Gugulethu's perspective (below) not only highlights the burden of dual identity, but also indicates the positive impact it can have on creating a more inclusive environment for future leaders.

There are days when the weight of my dual identity feels overwhelming. But I remind myself that my presence in these spaces is paving the way for future generations. (Gugulethu)

Qondisile, meanwhile, reflected on the dual nature of intersectionality, presenting both challenges and opportunities for unique contributions.

The intersectionality of my identity means I face unique challenges, but it also gives me a unique perspective. I use this to my advantage in my leadership role. (Qondisile)

Class dynamics were also highlighted, adding another layer of complexity to the experiences of African Black female leaders. This intersectionality can affect how leaders are perceived and treated in the workplace.

My background includes being raised in Mamelodi by my grandmother who supported us by selling illegal homemade alcohol. Despite the challenges, she instilled the importance of education as a key to success and self-reliance. (Lindiwe)

My parents emphasised the importance of education, even though we didn't have much. Their support and encouragement helped me to push through the barriers and achieve my goals. (Vuyelwa)

Coming from a lower socioeconomic background has made my journey harder, but it's also made me more determined to succeed. (Londi)

Class dynamics are real. Sometimes I feel like I have to work twice as hard to be taken seriously because of my background...When I first started working, there was an assumption that because I'm Black, I couldn't afford the car I had. This kind of assumption stems from the idea that my background shouldn't have allowed me to purchase such things, which is quite offensive (Zandile)

... "I didn't even know what 'previously disadvantaged' meant because I didn't come from that background. I had been more advantaged than most of the people in the boardroom at that moment, but they assumed otherwise. (Zandile)

The above stories highlight how socio-economic background and parental support can influence leadership experiences and the drive to succeed. Participants also shared how their eloquence and lifestyle helped them seem familiar to their white colleagues, thereby gaining access to some exclusive networks. Participants like Zandile who came from more privileged

backgrounds also shared sentiments of how they were illegitimised as leaders because they were not expected to be at the level they were both socially and professionally.

I found that being articulate and well-spoken helped me in many boardroom settings. It made my colleagues take me seriously and opened doors to networks that were previously inaccessible to me. (Anele)

My lifestyle, including the way I dress and present myself, has made a significant difference. It helped me blend in and be accepted in circles that are predominantly white. (Bandile)

My ability to communicate effectively and my polished appearance have allowed me to connect with influential people. This has been crucial in advancing my career. (Cebisile)

Being able to articulate my thoughts clearly and having a lifestyle that resonates with my colleagues have made it easier for me to gain their trust and access exclusive networks. (Funeka)

I've noticed that my eloquence and the way I carry myself have helped me navigate corporate environments smoothly. It has made my white colleagues more comfortable and willing to include me in their networks. (Gugulethu)

Speaking confidently and maintaining a certain lifestyle has definitely played a role in my acceptance among my white peers. It has opened up opportunities that might not have been available otherwise. (Jabulile)

Physical appearance, including aspects such as skin tone and hair texture, can also influence how African Black female leaders are perceived and treated in professional environments.

I've had to navigate not just racial and gender biases, but also biases related to my appearance. People make assumptions based on how I look, and I have to constantly prove them wrong. (Gugulethu)

There have been times when comments about my hair or skin colour have made me feel out of place. I've learned to embrace my appearance and use it as a strength. (Funeka)

My appearance has been a double-edged sword. It can be a source of bias, but I've learned to use it to my advantage by always presenting myself professionally. (Phaphama)

Physical appearance plays a role too. Being judged not just on my race and gender but also on my looks adds another layer of bias. (Xolisa)

These quotes highlight the additional challenges related to physical appearance that can affect leadership experiences and highlight the importance of embracing one's physical appearance and using it as a source of strength and identity.

The theme of intersectional and identity can be further expanded to highlight how the intersectional elements cut across the themes identified in the overall research analysis. This section of the findings highlights the deep influence of intersecting factors like race, gender, and socio-economic background on the experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa. The interplay of race and gender, in particular, creates unique

challenges, where both identities cannot be separated from one another. Together, these elements intensify the obstacles and biases faced by these women in their professional environments.

5.3.12.1 Proving Competence and Overcoming Biases

In the theme of proving competence, the participants demonstrated how intersectionality is constantly at play. The intersection of race and gender is an ongoing presence, informing not only how these women are perceived in professional spaces, but also how they are expected to perform. Each of these quotes reflects the dual burden they carry, highlighting the compounded biases they face, the heightened scrutiny they endure, and the pressures that shape their leadership journeys.

Being both Black and a woman means I have to work twice as hard to prove I belong.
(Anele)

I always feel like I need to go the extra mile just to be seen as competent. (Funeka)

For Anele, the intersection of her identity as being both Black and a woman means she faces an implicit expectation to work "twice as hard" to belong. This reflects a common narrative where African Black women feel the need to constantly prove their worth and competence. The intersectionality at play here is the dual expectation that she must not only counter gender biases in a male-dominated space, but also racial biases that lead others to doubt her capability.

Funeka shares a similar sentiment, where she feels the need to "go the extra mile" just to be seen as competent. This experience reflects the compounded effects of her race and gender, where societal stereotypes about both her identities lead to unfair evaluations of her abilities. Her intersectional identity requires her to exceed the expectations placed on her to merely achieve recognition, a theme echoed throughout these experiences.

When I walk into the room, I can see the doubt in their eyes, and it's always because of how I look. (Gugulethu)

They see my race and gender first, and competence comes last, so I always have to flip that assumption. (Cebisile)

Gugulethu highlighted the visible nature of these biases when she mentions the doubt she sees in others' eyes, tied explicitly to her appearance. This reflects how race and gender intersect visually and immediately in professional settings, where assumptions about capability are made based on how someone looks, rather than their expertise or performance. Cebisile similarly noted that her competence is evaluated last, which shows how intersectionality positions these identities as hurdles to be overcome in professional spaces.

It's exhausting having to constantly prove that I'm capable when my work should speak for itself. (Xolisa)

The burden of proving myself never goes away, regardless of how long I've been in the role. (Bandile)

The recurring theme of exhaustion and constant validation is expressed in Xolisa and Bandile's quotes above. For Xolisa, having to repeatedly prove her competence when her work should be sufficient highlights the additional emotional labour required to navigate these spaces. Similarly, Bandile's experience of having to prove herself regardless of how long she has been in her role demonstrates the ongoing nature of intersectional bias, where tenure or experience do not mitigate the underlying prejudices she faces.

The recurring theme of exhaustion and constant validation is expressed in Xolisa's and Bandile's quotes. For Xolisa, having to repeatedly prove her competence when her work should be sufficient highlights the additional emotional labour required to navigate these spaces. Similarly, Bandile's experience of having to prove herself "regardless of how long" she has been in her role demonstrates the ongoing nature of intersectional bias, where tenure or experience do not mitigate the underlying prejudices she faces.

Being a Black woman means carrying the weight of representation, which means never slipping up. (Thandeka)

Thandeka's reflection on "carrying the weight of representation" shows how intersectionality places additional pressure on African Black women, where they not only represent themselves, but also feel responsible for how their actions reflect on all Black women in professional spaces. This sense of collective representation is unique to the intersection of race and gender, where mistakes or failures are often magnified and applied to the larger group.

In meetings, I have to make sure I'm over-prepared because I'm expected to fail. (Lindiwe)

I feel like I have to outshine everyone just to get the same recognition my peers get easily. (Mbali)

Lindiwe and Mbali both reflected on the hyper-awareness that comes with their identity. Lindiwe mentioned being "over-prepared" because of the expectation that she will fail, highlighting the stereotype of incompetence that intersectional identities face. Similarly, Mbali felt the need to "outshine" her peers to achieve the same level of recognition.

5.3.12.2 Support Systems and Mentorship

The below quotes demonstrate that intersectionality adds layers of complexity to the experiences of African Black female leaders, making support systems and mentorship tailored to their specific needs even more critical. Mentors who understand the intersection of race and gender not only provide career guidance, but also help these leaders navigate emotional and psychological challenges. Whether it is through family, colleagues, or networks of other Black women in leadership, these support systems offer the solidarity, confidence, and validation that is often lacking in their professional environments.

My mentors helped me understand how to navigate the challenges of being a Black woman in leadership. (Bandile)

Bandile's quote highlights how mentors provide not only general career advice, but also specific strategies for navigating the dual challenges of being both Black and female in leadership. This understanding of intersectional challenges is crucial because mentors who have faced similar struggles can offer tailored advice on overcoming race and gender-based biases.

I have a strong support system that pushes me when I feel like giving up. (Simphiwe)

Without the support of my family, I wouldn't have been able to overcome the biases I faced early on. (Lindiwe)

Simphiwe and Lindiwe described how their support system became a source of motivation that kept them going when they faced the significant pressures of navigating corporate spaces. The combination of race and gender biases can make leadership roles feel isolating and overwhelming, and their support systems provide the encouragement and strength needed to push through these moments of doubt.

I wouldn't be where I am today without the mentorship I received from other women who understood my struggles. (Gugulethu)

My mentors helped me find my voice in rooms where I was often the only woman of colour. (Thandeka)

Gugulethu and Thandeka emphasised the importance of having mentors who understand their struggles as Black women. Gugulethu credited her success to the mentorship she received from other women who shared her experience, demonstrating how intersectionality creates a unique bond between those who face similar challenges. Thandeka echoed this, explaining how her mentors helped her amplify her voice in spaces where she was often the only woman of colour. These relationships are built on a shared understanding of the intersectional hurdles faced in leadership.

Having someone who believes in you and advocates for your success is critical. (Anele)

Being able to rely on mentors who have been through similar struggles helped me see that I wasn't alone. (Mbali)

In the above quotes, Anele and Mbali highlighted the significance of mentors who advocate for their success. Anele explained how having someone believe in her and actively support her career helped her navigate the challenges posed by her identity, while Mbali noted that seeing mentors who have faced similar struggles reassured her that she was not alone in her journey. This reinforces the idea that mentorship is not just about career advancement, but also about emotional support and solidarity, which is especially critical for women navigating intersectionality.

The sisterhood I've found in other Black female leaders has been a lifeline. (Phaphama)

Mentorship for me has been about finding someone who understands the unique pressures I face as a Black woman. (Cebisile)

Cebisile and Phaphama spoke about the confidence that mentorship and support networks provide. Cebisile finds mentorship meaningful because her mentors understand the unique pressures that come from being both Black and female. This understanding allows her to navigate her career more effectively. Phaphama described the “sisterhood” she has built with other Black women leaders as a “lifeline”, showing that solidarity and shared experiences create powerful support systems that can bolster confidence and resilience.

The support network I've built with other Black women in leadership has been invaluable for my confidence. (Funeka)

Funeka adds that the network she has developed with other Black women in leadership is invaluable for her confidence.

The above gives a clear indication that support systems and mentorship for these leaders goes beyond professional advice – it includes emotional support, strategies for navigating biases, and examples of resilience. The mentors who can relate to their intersectional struggles provide both a roadmap for success and a reminder that they are not alone in their challenges. This type of mentorship is invaluable in corporate spaces where Black women are frequently underrepresented and face heightened scrutiny. The support systems also foster a sense of community and belonging, which is essential for mental and emotional well-being. The “sisterhood” and solidarity described by some of the participants show how collective experiences and shared identity can strengthen resilience and empower individuals to overcome the unique barriers created by their simultaneity of race and gender.

5.3.12.3 Balancing Work and Personal Life

The participants highlighted the unique challenges that African Black female leaders face in balancing their professional and personal lives due to the compounded pressures of race and gender. These women are not only expected to excel in the workplace but also to fulfill traditional family responsibilities, often without the support or recognition their peers may receive. This constant balancing act reflects how intersectionality creates unique, heightened expectations for these leaders.

Balancing my career and personal life as a Black woman is harder because I'm judged on multiple fronts. The expectations from both work and home are intense. It feels like I can never truly give my best to either without compromising something. (Simpfiwe)

Juggling family, work, and the expectations placed on me as a Black woman in leadership is a constant struggle. I often feel torn between giving my all to my job and making sure I'm present for my family. It's hard to find a balance. (Bandile)

Simpfiwe and Bandile described the additional layers of judgment and expectation they face. Their experiences underscore how intersectionality shapes the expectations and judgments these women face, which are often different from those faced by others in similar positions.

I feel like I'm always compromising something, either my family or my work, just to stay afloat. I'm constantly pulled in different directions, and it often feels like I'm failing at both. (Mbali)

The pressure to be perfect in both spheres – at home and at work – is intense. It feels like I'm expected to be a superwoman, excelling in my career while also being the perfect mother and wife. It's exhausting. (Thandeka)

Mbali and Thandeka pointed out the sense of compromise and pressure that comes with trying to balance both spheres of their lives. This sense of never being able to achieve balance shows how the pressures of intersectionality manifest as a constant need to meet both work and home responsibilities. Black

Work-life balance feels impossible when you're constantly expected to prove your worth in the workplace. It's like I'm always on, always trying to do more to be taken seriously, but it takes a toll on my personal life. (Funeka)

My work-life balance is a delicate act, and sometimes I feel guilty for not giving enough to either. I'm constantly feeling like I'm not doing enough at home or at work, and the guilt is always there. (Gugulethu)

Funeka and Gugulethu emphasised how difficult it is to maintain a work-life balance when the workplace expects them to continuously prove their worth. Intersectionality plays a critical role in shaping these experiences, as both women must contend with societal expectations linked to their race and gender in both the professional and personal spheres.

Having support at home has helped me balance the pressures of work, but it's still a challenge. Even with a support system, the weight of expectations from both sides can be overwhelming. (Xolisa)

As a Black woman in leadership, balancing both family and work responsibilities feels like an extra burden. The expectations are so much higher for me in both areas, and it's hard to manage it all. (Anele)

Xolisa and Anele reflected on the importance of having support systems to help them manage their intersecting pressures, yet while personal support systems can alleviate some of the pressure, they do not eliminate the intersectional challenges these women face in balancing their dual roles.

I have to work harder than my peers, and at the same time, I'm expected to maintain a perfect family life. The pressure is immense, and it's tough to keep up with everything. (Lindiwe)

The demands of my job sometimes leave little room for my personal life, and I have to find a way to make both work. It's not easy, and there are days when I feel like I'm barely managing either. (Phaphama)

Lindiwe and Phaphama emphasised the heightened expectations placed on them as Black women leaders, Lindiwe feels that she has to work harder than her peers while simultaneously being expected to maintain an ideal family life, which reflects the higher bar set for Black women in leadership. Phaphama speaks to how the demands of her job often leave little time for her personal life, highlighting the toll that work takes on her ability to meet family responsibilities. These quotes demonstrate that intersectionality influences not only the expectations placed on these women, but also the strain they feel in trying to meet them.

The emotional toll of this balancing act is evident. Many of the women expressed feelings of guilt, frustration, and exhaustion as they attempt to meet the demands placed on them. The need to continuously prove themselves professionally while maintaining family responsibilities leads to a sense of compromise and the feeling that they are never able to fully succeed in either area. This emotional burden is compounded by the intersectional expectations that they must navigate.

Mentorship and support systems, both personal and professional, provide essential tools to help these women cope with the pressures of intersectionality. Mentors who understand their struggles can offer advice and solidarity, while family and home support systems can help mitigate some of the practical challenges they face. However, as the quotes suggest, even with these support systems, the expectations remain disproportionate, reflecting the unique challenges of being a Black woman in leadership.

5.3.12.4 Leadership and Resilience

The quotes provided from the African Black female leaders reflect how intersectionality plays a significant role in shaping their leadership styles and the resilience they cultivate, both personally and within their teams. The women's leadership styles are heavily influenced by the challenges they have faced due to their intersecting identities, and the support systems and mentorship they have received (or not) are crucial in navigating these challenges.

I used to be very aggressive and emotional in my leadership. Over time I've become more compassionate, leading with empathy. I lead an all-Black, all-female team of superstars demanding excellence but understanding their unique challenges. (Cebisile)

Leading with empathy is crucial for me, as I know what it's like to face challenges because of your identity. I try to make sure people feel seen and valued, which is something I didn't always experience. (Funeka)

Cebisile and Funeka both described the evolution of their leadership styles, in which empathy is key. The intersection of race and gender informs their leadership, making empathy not just a leadership tactic, but a core value born from lived experience.

Gugulethu and Thandeka below listed empathy and resilience as the core values that have shaped her leadership. By creating an inclusive, understanding space, these leaders are able to empower their teams and help them navigate the complexities of working in environments that often marginalise them.

Empathy and resilience are central to how I lead because those are the values that shaped me. It's important for me to create a space where my team feels they can succeed despite the challenges. (Gugulethu)

Thandeka, Sindi, Phaphama, and Simphiwe emphasised the role of resilience in their leadership, with Phaphama describing it as her strongest leadership tool. Bandile and Simphiwe both highlighted resilience as not just a personal characteristic, but a necessity for Black women in leadership, one they actively teach and reinforce within their teams.

I lead by showing others that no matter the biases they face, resilience can carry them through. It's about empowering them to push beyond the barriers, just as I've had to do in my career. (Thandeka)

I strive to lead by example, proving that even with all the odds stacked against you, you can still succeed. My team sees that in me, and it gives them the confidence to push through their own obstacles. (Sindi)

Resilience has become my strongest tool in leadership; without it, I wouldn't have survived in this space. My leadership is built around the strength I've developed over the years, and I pass that onto my team. (Phaphama)

Being resilient is part of my leadership journey, and it's how I ensure my team knows they are valued despite the biases. I'm constantly teaching them the power of resilience in overcoming corporate challenges. (Simphiwe)

Anele and Bandile stressed the importance of supporting other Black women as part of their leadership philosophy, which highlights the importance of support systems that are tailored to the unique experiences of Black women. Mentorship, for them, goes beyond traditional career guidance – it is about helping each other survive and thrive in environments where they are often marginalised.

Lindiwe touched on the personal journey she endured and described how her resilience defines her leadership. By sharing her story with her team, she hopes to show that resilience is not just about surviving in challenging spaces, but about thriving despite the odds. This form of mentorship, rooted in lived experience, offers a deeper sense of connection and understanding for the women who look up to her for guidance.

I lead with the understanding that we have to lift each other as we rise, particularly as Black women. Resilience is at the core of everything we do, and I make sure my team knows that. (Anele)

Resilience in leadership is not just a choice; it's a necessity for Black women navigating these spaces. I had to learn early on that without it, I wouldn't be able to achieve my goals or help my team achieve theirs. (Bandile)

My leadership is defined by resilience because my journey to this position was anything but easy. I want my team to see that resilience is not just about surviving but thriving despite the odds. (Lindiwe)

The resilience demonstrated by these leaders is deeply influenced by their experiences of navigating both racial and gender challenges in corporate environments. Their unique position as Black women has required them to develop resilience not only for personal growth, but also as an essential leadership quality. They understand that the barriers they face are not just personal, but part of a broader system, and they address these obstacles by fostering environments that emphasise support and empathy for their teams.

Central to their approach is the role of mentorship and strong support networks. Many of these leaders serve as mentors, particularly to other Black women, providing a blueprint for resilience in the face of similar challenges. Their experiences highlight that resilience goes beyond merely enduring difficulties; it is about using those experiences to achieve success and lead in a way that inspires others. These leaders transform their personal challenges into strengths, using empathy and resilience to guide others through similar paths in their professional journeys.

5.3.12.5 Navigating Male-Dominated Environments

The below quotes capture the significant role of intersectionality in navigating male-dominated environments for African Black female leaders. They highlight the compounded challenges these women leaders face due to the intersection of race and gender, as well as the strategies they adopt to assert their presence and authority in spaces that were historically and structurally not designed for them.

I often feel like I'm fighting two battles – one for being a woman and another for being Black. It's tiring, but it's part of the reality I face every day. (Bandile)

In male-dominated spaces, I have to fight to be heard twice – once as a woman, and again as a Black person. It's a constant uphill battle to be seen and heard. (Simpfiwe)

As a Black female, you come across as strong and confident, which can make people uncomfortable. I've learned to soften my persona because if I assert myself, I'm seen as too domineering. So, I constantly have to manage how I present myself to make others feel at ease. (Linda)

The constant uphill battle these women have to fight reflects how intersectionality creates overlapping systems of disadvantage that affect their ability to be seen and heard in male-dominated environments.

Cebisile, Gugulethu, and Xolisa described the impact of racial and gender biases on their professional experiences. Cebisile notes that it's not just about gender — her race adds an additional layer to how she is perceived, complicating her interactions in these environments. Gugulethu highlights the need to remain strong and push back against biases, emphasizing that there is no room for weakness when navigating these spaces. Xolisa further underscores the need for assertiveness, which she describes as not just a leadership style but a "survival mechanism" necessary to avoid being overlooked or dismissed.

The above, highlighting that African Black women face heightened scrutiny and bias in male-dominated environments. Assertiveness, resilience, and standing firm against biases are essential for the women's survival in these spaces.

"It's not just about gender, it's about race too. I navigate both in every interaction, knowing that my race adds an additional layer to how I'm perceived. (Cebisile)

I've had to stand firm and push back against biases in these environments. There's no space for weakness, you have to be strong all the time. (Gugulethu)

In these rooms, being assertive is not an option; it's a survival mechanism. Without it, you'd easily be overlooked or dismissed. (Xolisa)

The below quotes from Funeka and Anele illustrate the persistent need to prove themselves in male-dominated spaces, despite their qualifications,

"Being the only Black woman in the room means I'm always balancing gender and racial dynamics. You constantly have to prove that you belong while trying not to seem too aggressive. (Funeka)

The dynamics in male-dominated environments are often about proving that I belong. It's like you have to prove yourself all over again, even though you're qualified. (Anele)

Phaphama and Lindiwe highlighted the psychological and emotional toll of navigating male-dominated environments, illustrating how the intersection of race and gender not only adds to their professional burden, but also increases the emotional labour required to survive in these environments.

Navigating male-dominated environments is like walking on eggshells. You're always being watched and judged differently, so you have to be twice as careful. (Phaphama)

It feels like I'm constantly having to justify my existence in spaces that were never meant for me. The pressure is immense, but I've learned to handle it. (Lindiwe)

The women not only contend with gender-related biases but also face racial prejudices, and the intersection of these two aspects creates unique obstacles. The pressure to constantly prove their competence, combat stereotypes, and establish their authority stems from the overlapping biases related to both race and gender.

Additionally, the quotes illustrate how these women have developed different strategies to cope with these demands, such as being assertive, demonstrating resilience, and carefully managing how they present themselves in these environments. Their journeys reflect the extra effort they must invest to receive the same acknowledgment and respect as their peers. Despite these hurdles, they remain determined, relying on their inner strength and leadership abilities to overcome barriers, often standing alone as representatives of both their race and gender in these settings.

5.3.12.6 Influence of Upbringing and Education

The below statements reveal how intersectionality plays a fundamental role in shaping the upbringing and educational experiences of African Black female leaders. Intersectionality, in this context, is defined by the interplay of race, gender, and socio-economic status, which together deeply influenced how these women were raised and their approach to education as a tool for upward mobility.

Upbringing raised by a single mom who also just got on with it. Her mother had tertiary qualifications, which was not the norm back then. This instilled a strong belief in the

importance of education, and by the time we were growing up, the conversation was always about which university we would attend. (Qophelo)

Intersectionality played a role in Qophelo's mother's achievements, which defied both racial and gender norms, making education a pathway to breaking down societal expectations. This background allowed her to grow up in an environment where education was seen as the key to transcending these limitations, particularly for Black women in a society that historically limited opportunities for them.

For Xolisa, the intersectional challenges of being a Black woman from a poor, rural environment meant that education was not just a personal achievement, but a way to overcome both systemic and economic barriers. Her story highlights how intersectionality creates additional hurdles, but education can provide an opportunity to rise above them.

My background growing up in a village surrounded by poverty shaped me. I knew I had to study hard to rise above the lack of opportunities and become something more. My education is what helped me break free from that environment. (Xolisa)

Zandile's experience of attending a multiracial school equipped her with unique skills that help her navigate professional spaces where she is often a minority.

My background attending a multiracial school gave me confidence in engaging with people from different races. That experience helped me navigate corporate environments more easily, giving me the confidence to hold my own. (Zandile)

For Khanya below, coming from a family of academics, education was always prioritised, which contrasts with the experiences of those who came from more disadvantaged environments. However, intersectionality is still relevant here, as being Black and female in an academic-focused environment emphasises the importance of education in overcoming the barriers imposed by race and gender. Her upbringing was shaped by a family that valued continuous learning, which was seen as essential for excelling in environments where Black women often face additional scrutiny.

Coming from a family of academics, education was always the foundation. My parents' focus on academics taught me to value continuous learning and strive for excellence, which has guided me in my career. (Khanya)

In the below quote, Gugulethu shows how attending a private school gave her a strong foundation, but intersectionality is evident in how her socio-economic status affected her experience. Although she received a high-quality education, she still felt different from her wealthier peers, which meant she had to work harder to prove herself. This reflects how the

intersecting factors of socio-economic background, race, and gender influenced her sense of identity and her resilience in overcoming these challenges.

I attended a private school, and while that gave me a foundation for success, it also made me different from my peers. I had to work harder to prove myself because I wasn't from a wealthy family, and that taught me resilience. (Gugulethu)

The above quotes demonstrate how the participants' upbringings and educational paths were deeply influenced by the intersection of race, gender, and socio-economic status. For these African Black female leaders, education was more than a pursuit of personal growth; it was a means to overcome the challenges imposed by a society that often limited their opportunities based on their identity. Many came from backgrounds where economic hardship was a daily reality, and for them, education represented a way to break free from poverty and the constraints of their circumstances. Others were raised in families that valued academic achievement, instilling in them the importance of education as a tool to challenge racial and gender biases. Regardless of their backgrounds, the intersection of these factors created a common understanding that education was the key to overcoming the compounded disadvantages they faced.

The journey through education for these women was often a struggle against systemic barriers, shaped by the biases they encountered due to their race and gender. They had to work harder than their peers to prove themselves, not just academically, but in all aspects of their lives. Their resilience and determination were forged in response to these challenges, and education became their pathway to personal and professional success; it equipped them with the skills and confidence to challenge societal norms and assert their rightful place in spaces where they were often underrepresented. Ultimately, their educational experiences were intertwined with their identities, providing them with both the means and the motivation to rise above the limitations society placed upon them.

Multiple processes of identity are a challenge and highlight the need for resilience and strategic thinking while leveraging unique perspectives and identity awareness offers opportunities for these leaders to advocate for themselves and their teams effectively. Navigating biases remains a significant hurdle, but the determination and unique insights brought by these leaders can drive significant positive change in organisational cultures.

5.3.12.7 Striving For Excellence

The quotes under this section highlight how intersectionality shapes the pursuit of excellence and recognition for African Black female leaders. The participants shared their experiences of navigating race and gender biases, illustrating how the need to prove themselves is amplified by their intersectional identities.

In the below statements, Thandeka and Anele capture the reality that simply being "good" is not enough. As Black women, they feel they must be exceptional to even be considered for the same opportunities that are more easily granted to others. This is a clear example of intersectionality, where the burden of representation adds an extra layer of pressure to succeed.

As a Black woman, I constantly feel the need to prove my worth and be better than my peers. It's not enough to just be good; I have to be exceptional to even be considered for opportunities that are more easily handed to others. (Thandeka)

I have to push for excellence, because any mistake will be seen as a reflection of my race. If I fail, it's not just a personal failure, it becomes a statement about Black people or Black women as a whole. That's the pressure I have to manage daily. (Anele)

Gugulethu, Bandile, Jabulile and Funeka also spoke about the exhausting nature of this pursuit of excellence. Gugulethu emphasizes that excellence is the bare minimum required for her to be recognized, while Bandile shares that anything less than being exceptional makes her invisible in leadership spaces. Funeka reveals how excellence becomes her defense against biases, as she knows she is always being evaluated more rigorously than others. Their experiences reflect how the intersection of race and gender forces them to work harder just to meet the same standards as their peers, highlighting the inequities they must overcome.

Excellence is not just a goal, it's the bare minimum for me to be recognised. It's exhausting, but if I don't consistently exceed expectations, I feel like I'll be overlooked... When you're a Black woman in corporate, mediocrity isn't an option. If you're average, you'll just blend into the background. I've always felt the need to push myself harder than my counterparts to stand out (Gugulethu)

I know I have to be exceptional to even be noticed. If I'm average, I might as well be invisible. That's just the reality of being a Black woman in leadership. (Bandile)

It's exhausting, but I've learned that to maintain my place at the table, I have to be perfect at all times. Mistakes are not easily forgiven when you're a Black woman. (Jabulile)

Excellence is how I counter the biases against me; it's how I ensure they can't dismiss me. I don't get to have an off day because I'm always being evaluated, even when others aren't. (Funeka)

For Qondisile the intersection of race, gender drives them to exceed expectations, as she feels she is continuously evaluated through the lens of her identity.

The pressure to excel is always there. You're constantly aware that you're being judged not just on your abilities but on your identity as a Black woman. That pushes me to always exceed expectations. (Qondisile)

Similarly for Gugulethu, the intersections of race, gender and class become the constant reminder of how she is evaluated, so she is driven to succeed even more.

I've found that people who have dealt with Black people, dealt with Black people who were not confident or assertive... when they meet someone like me, it shakes them so much... they find reasons like 'Oh, it's because you come from a different background.' Then, when you succeed, they try to align your success to something they can relate to. (Gugulethu)

Hlengiwe highlighted how intersectionality imposes the need to overachieve, as the bar is set much higher for her to earn respect and recognition in her role.

I've realised that to be taken seriously as a Black woman, I need to constantly outperform everyone else. I'm not given the luxury of just being good – I have to be exceptional. (Hlengiwe)

Xolisa described the additional effort she must put in (working harder, being smarter, and staying later) just to achieve recognition. Her experiences reflect how intersectionality leads to an unfair burden of proof, where Black women must consistently outperform their peers to receive equal treatment and recognition.

I've had to work harder, be smarter, and stay later to achieve the same recognition. It's a reality I've come to accept, but it's tiring knowing I can't ever relax or let my guard down. (Xolisa)

These quotes reveal the unique challenges that African Black female leaders face due to the intersection of race and gender. The combination of these identities places them under a microscope, where their actions are subject to heightened scrutiny. This constant evaluation forces them to strive for a level of excellence far beyond what is expected of their peers. They are not just working to succeed professionally, but also to counteract the biases that suggest their race or gender might make them less capable. Any mistakes they make are not seen as individual errors, but are often magnified and linked to negative stereotypes about Black women.

The pressure to be flawless and exceed expectations is a reflection of the dual obstacles these women face. They must navigate both racial and gender biases simultaneously, making their pursuit of excellence not just about career advancement, but about survival in spaces where they are often underrepresented and undervalued. For them, excellence is not merely ambition, but a necessity. It becomes a way to prove their worth and legitimacy in environments that may

otherwise question their competence. This constant push to excel is driven by the need to protect themselves from being unfairly judged based on deeply ingrained societal biases.

The overlapping identities of race and gender significantly shape the experiences of African Black female leaders, creating distinct challenges in corporate environments. The intersection of these identities often results in increased scrutiny, bias, and higher expectations, requiring these women to navigate a complex and demanding landscape. Their race and gender combine to form unique obstacles that call for resilience, assertiveness, and a high level of performance to succeed.

Themes such as ‘striving for excellence’ and ‘navigating male-dominated environments’ highlight the pressure these leaders face to not only meet expectations, but to consistently surpass them. They must continuously prove their abilities, often more so than their peers. Their achievements are scrutinised more intensely and any misstep is magnified, reflecting broader societal stereotypes about African Black women.

In addition to the above, the importance of ‘coping strategies’ and ‘support systems’ is clear in these contexts. Mentorship, strong networks, and personal resilience play a vital role in helping these women navigate the pressures they face. Support from other African Black women is especially critical in providing the validation and encouragement needed to persist in often isolating environments. The resilience they build through these experiences informs their leadership styles, enabling them to foster more inclusive and supportive spaces for themselves and others.

The core of these findings is that intersectionality not only defines the barriers that African Black women face, but also shapes the strategies they use to overcome them. It drives them to develop leadership approaches rooted in empathy and perseverance, constantly reaffirming their worth in the face of systemic bias. Through their tenacity, African Black female leaders are not just breaking barriers – they are creating pathways for future generations to thrive in similar settings.

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

In this section, the researcher synthesises the themes from the findings, draws similarities between the research findings and existing theories, and highlights theoretical gaps in the research.

This study has captured the essence of the lived experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa, and highlighted why there continues to be a gap in the representation of African Black females in senior leadership positions, despite the efforts of affirmative action policies from the government and assessments by the CEE.

It is evident that African Black female leaders' experiences in corporate South Africa are negative, in that they are constantly challenged, oppressed and excluded because of their race and gender. In addition, their experiences are not comparable to those of White females, because they have additional subordinates against which they are assessed. Finally, the performance standards set for African Black female leaders are higher than those set for their male counterparts and White women.

The findings highlight that the realities and experiences of African Black females in the workplace go beyond the agentic deficiency and agentic penalty that has been generalised as a reality for all women in the workplace. This research proves the theories laid out in the problem statement and further expands the knowledge of, and insights into, other dynamics that are at play for African Black female leaders as a population group in South Africa.

The challenges faced by this group are prevalent in various corporate structures and industries throughout South Africa, as the participants in the study were from various companies which represent various industries within South Africa. The regulations that have been promulgated by the South African government have in some cases contributed to organisations feeling under pressure to appoint African Black female leaders merely to achieve compliance, without introducing the necessary mechanisms and interventions to support their entry and growth.

The experiences that were shared by this group of African Black female leaders show the ways in which they are treated, spoken to, ignored and assessed relative to other groups, which disadvantages them in the workplace. These systems of disadvantage, combined with their race and gender, create a unique set of circumstances which make it difficult for them to cope, thereby negatively impacting their physical and psychological wellness. The positive side of

this is that these unique circumstances have created unique leaders in the African Black female group. Their resilience, passion, and genuine care for people make them leaders who look beyond maximising profits, who create sustainable organisations that serve the greater good of humankind.

In this study, the main question was: What are the lived experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa? The study has addressed this question by giving real-life examples of how African Black female leaders are currently navigating corporate South Africa and the dynamics they face daily. The lived experiences of African Black female leaders are expressed and summarised in the following themes: support systems and mentorship, the influence of upbringing and education, navigating male-dominated environments, intersectionality and identity, and coping strategies.

The study further addressed the literature constructs that provided the research parameters that guided the researcher, i.e., race dynamics, gender dynamics, documented lived experiences, intersectionality, and class dynamics.

This study has demonstrated how each of the literature constructs significantly influences the experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa. Initially, as depicted in Figure 3, these constructs were considered equal in the preliminary analysis of existing theories about the lived experiences of these leaders, however the findings from this research revealed the nuanced and varied impacts of each construct, providing a more detailed understanding of the unique challenges and dynamics faced by African Black female leaders in their professional environments. This deeper analysis highlighted the complexity of their experiences and the critical importance of considering each construct's specific influence, demonstrating that intersectionality has the biggest impact. These have been set out in Figure 8 below, with additional constructs (highlighted in red) outlining the additional nuances.

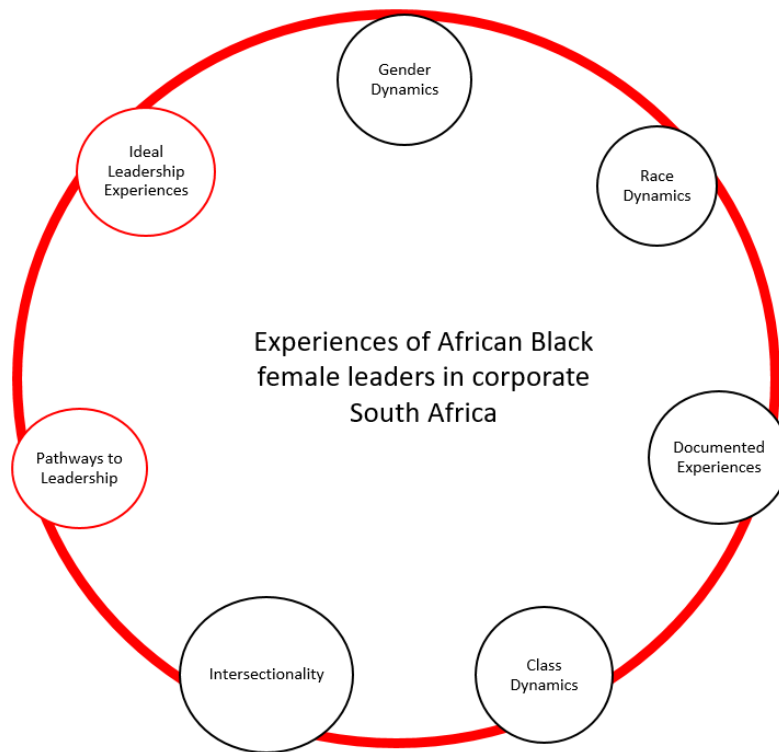


Figure 8. Key components of the research findings

Source: Author’s own construct

The findings of this study demonstrate how intersectionality, which is the overlapping identities of race, gender, and class, plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa. The participants' narratives revealed a constant need for validation, as well as a need to navigate biases and overcome systemic barriers, which is compounded by the intersection of these identities. This section will further explore the interplay of race, gender, class, and leadership experiences.

6.2 Race Dynamics

The role of race plays a significant part in shaping how African Black female leaders are perceived in corporate settings, especially regarding their legitimacy. Despite their qualifications and proven capabilities, these women often face increased scrutiny due to their race. The constant requirement to demonstrate their competence, known as the “prove-it-again” bias, highlights how they are repeatedly forced to validate their worth in ways that are not expected of their white male counterparts. This ongoing racialised skepticism leads to both

emotional and mental strain as they strive to overcome these biases in predominantly white corporate environments.

Race also significantly impacts their leadership experiences, as their contributions and efforts are often devalued or ignored. This can be seen in how their physical appearance, such as hairstyles associated with Black culture, are a focal point of discrimination. As a result, these leaders must navigate not only the expectations tied to their professional roles, but also the racialised standards imposed on them. This constant marginalisation not only affects their personal and emotional health, but also hinders their progression within corporate structures, as their leadership contributions are frequently downplayed or disregarded.

The participants described how they frequently encounter doubts about their leadership abilities due to their race, gender and socio-economic backgrounds. This doubt often leads to a continuous need to prove their competence, which is both emotionally and mentally exhausting. Despite their qualifications and experience, they face scrutiny that their peers do not, affecting their job satisfaction and career progression. The participants demonstrate resilience by consistently working harder, pursuing further qualifications, and engaging in continuous self-improvement to overcome the biases they face. This persistent pursuit of excellence is not just a personal goal, but a strategic necessity to gain recognition and assert their capabilities in the workplace.

By investing time and effort into acquiring additional education and professional certifications, the participants aimed to reinforce their credentials and leave no room for doubt about their competence. This is because they have been exposed to scenarios where their level of qualification was a barrier to entry into leadership or contributed to holding them back. All the participants, with the exception of one, possessed a post graduate qualification. The participants' commitment to self-improvement extends beyond formal qualifications, however. They actively seek opportunities to develop their skills through workshops, training programmes, and mentorship. This dedication to personal and professional growth not only enhances their expertise, but also demonstrates their commitment to excellence, setting them apart in their fields.

In the workplace, this pursuit of excellence translates into a strong work ethic, characterised by diligence, attention to detail, and a drive to exceed expectations. The participants understand that merely meeting standards is insufficient; they need to consistently surpass them to gain the same level of recognition as their counterparts.

This concept – named the “prove-it-again” bias – was described by Ridgeway et al. (2022). It is especially noticeable when Black women have to repeatedly demonstrate their skills and abilities to be recognised as competent. This is a burden that is less frequently experienced by their white male colleagues. Adding to this, they argue that this challenge is compounded by the intersection of ageism and gendered racism, where younger-looking African Black women face even more scrutiny. To counter this, they must use particular strategies to establish their expertise and legitimacy in their professional environments.

Despite concerted efforts in diversity and inclusion, many organisational initiatives fall short due to lingering biases in hiring, promotions, and performance evaluations. Participants highlighted instances where they often face the “tightrope” bias, i.e., balancing assertiveness and likability, and frequently encounter exclusion and emotional labour not experienced by their white colleagues. Defending their race, a lack of mentorship, and the need to code-switch in predominantly white workplaces adds to these challenges (Hall et al., 2012; Phadke & Sitaraman, 2016; Williams & Boginsky, 2022).

African Black women leaders often find themselves improving cultural competence and diversity goals within organisations, only to have their efforts questioned or undervalued once they depart a meeting room. Participants in this study highlighted how their leadership efforts, albeit effective, go unrecognised and unacknowledged. Pay inequities and higher unemployment rates highlight the persistent systemic barriers in the labour market, especially among leadership positions. Additionally, African Black women's hairstyles and physical appearance serve as racial and gender discrimination points that further marginalise them in professional settings (Curtis, 2017).

To solidify their commitment to diversity and inclusion, organisations can implement comprehensive policies that specifically address the underrepresentation of African Black females in leadership positions. These policies should extend beyond mere rhetoric, however, by incorporating tangible actions that reshape organisational cultures and practices.

Establishing clear diversity and inclusion policies is a crucial step towards creating a more equitable workplace. This can involve setting measurable targets and metrics aimed at increasing the representation of African Black female talent at various levels within an organisation. By defining specific goals, companies signal their dedication to fostering a workforce that reflects the diversity of the broader community.

To ensure accountability, it is essential for organisations to regularly assess and report on their progress in meeting diversity and inclusion objectives. Transparency in these matters not only demonstrates a commitment to change, but also provides a benchmark against which employees and external stakeholders can measure the organisation's success in fostering an inclusive environment. These are clearly set out in the Employment Equity Act and the Gender Equality Framework. Organisations that are not compliant need to be held accountable and the relevant government bodies need to take action to address issues of non-compliance (DEL, 2023).

In tandem with these efforts, companies should actively seek out African Black female candidates when recruiting for leadership positions. This proactive approach will help dismantle existing biases and ensure that a diverse pool of talent is considered for key roles. This may involve partnering with professional organisations, utilising diverse recruitment channels, and implementing blind recruitment practices to mitigate unconscious biases during the hiring process.

Beyond recruitment, organisations must also prioritise the retention and development of African Black female talent. This could involve creating mentorship programmes and leadership development initiatives, as well as providing opportunities for skill-building and career advancement. By investing in the professional growth of African Black female employees, organisations not only enhance their individual potential, but also contribute to the overall strength and resilience of the workforce.

In conclusion, the imperative to establish robust diversity and inclusion policies, coupled with proactive recruitment practices, is paramount in ushering in a transformative era within corporate South Africa. This commitment is not merely a checkbox exercise but a fundamental restructuring of organisational paradigms to foster a workplace that authentically recognises, embraces, and harnesses the talents of African Black females.

The impact of these policies extends far beyond meeting diversity quotas; it signifies a conscious effort to break down entrenched systemic barriers that have historically marginalised certain demographics. By actively promoting diversity and inclusion, organisations not only enrich their talent pool, but also cultivate an environment where creativity, innovation, and resilience flourish. These diversity and inclusion policies should not be static; they must evolve in response to the ever-changing landscape of societal norms and expectations. Regular

evaluations, feedback loops, and adjustments ensure that these policies remain effective, relevant, and aligned with the dynamic needs of a diverse workforce.

6.3 Gender Dynamics

Alongside racial biases, gender discrimination also significantly hinders the career progression of African Black female leaders. They are caught in what is often described as the “tightrope” bias, where they must balance assertiveness and likability, a challenge that is not faced by their male counterparts. This delicate balancing act often leads to exclusion from key decision-making processes and puts them at a disadvantage in male-dominated environments. Gender, combined with race, creates an even more complex set of barriers, limiting their upward mobility in environments that are not designed to support women, particularly Black women, in leadership roles. It is also important to acknowledge the simultaneity of race and gender in the identity process of African Black females. When evaluating an African Black female leader, one cannot evaluate them on gender alone, but on both race and gender.

The participants reported facing biases that affect their hiring, promotion opportunities, and performance evaluations. Gendered expectations often force them to adopt specific strategies to assert their leadership, such as being more assertive in male-dominated sectors, while simultaneously managing the societal expectation of being “likable”. These pressures reinforce their need to continuously prove their competence, often at the cost of personal well-being.

The findings reveal the critical importance of balancing work and personal life for African Black female leaders. This is essential for maintaining overall well-being and ensuring sustained career success. Participants described the constant challenge of juggling professional responsibilities with personal and family commitments. This balancing act often requires significant effort and strategic planning to manage the demands of both work and home effectively. The emotional and physical toll of managing these dual roles was a recurring theme; participants highlighted the stress and guilt associated with not being fully present for their families due to professional commitments.

The women also discussed the pressures of maintaining a high performance level at work while fulfilling personal obligations, which often leads to feelings of burnout and exhaustion. Support systems, particularly from family and partners, play a crucial role in helping participants manage this balance. Family support provides emotional stability and practical assistance, such as help with childcare, which allows participants to focus more on their careers when needed.

Additionally, having a supportive work environment that recognises and accommodates their need for work-life balance is vital.

The ability to balance work and personal life is fundamental to the participants' well-being, job satisfaction, and career longevity. It highlights the need for organisational policies and cultures that support work-life balance, such as flexible working arrangements and a supportive workplace environment, to help African Black female leaders thrive both professionally and personally.

Studies by Catalyst (2004b) and Mathur-Helm (2005) highlighted that managing a work-life balance, especially for individuals with family responsibilities, presents significant challenges, which are often exacerbated by societal expectations and workplace dynamics. Women, in particular, face substantial hurdles due to their traditional roles as primary caregivers, which can interrupt their careers and make it difficult to achieve a second start after such breaks. This dual burden is even more pronounced for African Black females, who encounter both racial and gender discrimination, limiting their access to power and privilege in the workplace. The persistent stereotypes that women are predisposed to marriage and childbearing, and thus more likely to quit their jobs, further complicate their professional advancement and contribute to an uncomfortable and less productive work environment.

To manage these dual roles effectively, setting clear boundaries and prioritising tasks are crucial strategies. This includes creating a structured schedule that allocates specific times for work and family responsibilities, ensuring that neither is neglected. Additionally, leveraging support systems both at home and in the workplace can significantly impact achieving a balance. At home, sharing responsibilities with partners or other family members can alleviate some of the burdens, while in the workplace, policies such as flexible working hours, remote work options, and parental leave can provide the necessary support for employees to manage their dual roles effectively. The presence of a supportive work culture that acknowledges and accommodates the personal responsibilities of its employees can lead to better work-life integration and overall job satisfaction. In addition, addressing gender-related issues such as pay disparities and promotion opportunities can help create a more equitable environment where women feel valued and supported in their professional journeys (Catalyst, 2004b; Cletus et al., 2018).

The challenges of managing work-life balance are significant, particularly for those with family responsibilities, employing effective strategies for setting boundaries and prioritising tasks,

along with robust support systems at home and in the workplace, can facilitate a more harmonious integration of professional and personal life.

This research further highlighted the critical strategies necessary for African Black female leaders to thrive in male-dominated environments. Participants shared that they often need to assert their authority and continually prove their competence to be acknowledged and respected. This persistent effort to demonstrate their capabilities is vital for their professional advancement. Developing strong professional relationships emerged as another key strategy. These connections provide essential emotional support and practical advantages, such as job referrals and career guidance, which are instrumental in helping these leaders navigate workplace biases and challenges. Building a network of allies and mentors within their industry is crucial for increasing their visibility and facilitating career progression.

Participants discussed the need to maintain a high level of self-assurance and resilience to cope with the additional scrutiny and biases they encounter. This inner strength enables them to persevere and succeed, despite the obstacles they face. Creating a supportive environment within their teams was highlighted as equally important. By fostering a culture of inclusivity and collaboration, these leaders are able to navigate male-dominated spaces more effectively and serve as positive role models for their colleagues.

Studies by Carrim and Nkomo (2016) and Rosette et al. (2018) confirmed that asserting authority and gaining respect in male-dominated sectors requires a multifaceted approach, particularly for women who face unique challenges due to gender biases. One effective strategy is to adopt assertive communication and leadership styles, as women who are willing to “dig in their heels” and insist on being heard often find it easier to navigate these environments, despite the initial resistance they may encounter. However, this assertiveness can sometimes backfire, as dominant women are often perceived as less likeable and less employable compared to their male counterparts, which can hinder their career advancement.

Building strong professional relationships is crucial in overcoming these biases. Women who cultivate professional networks and alliances can gain the support and recognition needed to lead high-value projects and secure essential roles, which are often blocked by dominant group members. This relational approach can also help mitigate the perception of incompetence that some male colleagues may hold, believing that women are merely filling quotas rather than earning their positions on merit. Continuous validation is another critical aspect, as women in leadership roles often need to consistently prove their competence and worth, which can be

emotionally taxing. The constant need for validation not only affects their self-perception but also contributes to a significant emotional toll, as they navigate the dual pressures of meeting high performance standards and countering gender stereotypes (Burrell, 2022; Carrim & Nkomo, 2016; Rosette et al., 2018).

This constant need to prove oneself can lead to stress and burnout, as women must balance their professional identities with societal expectations and cultural norms that may discourage assertiveness. Also, the perception that women are less capable or committed due to potential family responsibilities further exacerbates these challenges, making it harder for them to be entrusted with significant responsibilities or leadership roles. Despite legislative efforts and policies aimed at promoting gender equality, women still find themselves underrepresented in top management positions globally, including in South Africa, where racial and gender biases intersect to create additional barriers. Therefore, while assertiveness and relationship-building are essential strategies, they must be complemented by organisational changes that address systemic biases and provide a more supportive environment for women leaders (Cletus et al., 2018; Mathur-Helm, 2005; Rosette et al., 2018).

Effectively navigating male-dominated environments requires a multifaceted approach for African Black female leaders. Assertiveness is crucial, as these leaders must consistently assert their authority and competence to be taken seriously. This involves not only voicing their ideas and decisions confidently, but also standing firm in the face of opposition. Assertiveness helps in breaking down stereotypes and ensures that their contributions are recognised and valued. Without it, they risk being overshadowed or ignored in professional settings where their presence is already underrepresented.

Equally important is the establishment of strong professional networks. These networks provide a dual function, offering emotional support and practical benefits. Emotional support from peers and mentors helps leaders manage the stress and isolation that can come from being one of the few, or only, African Black women in their workplace. Practical benefits, such as job referrals and career advice, are invaluable for navigating the complexities of career progression. By building a network of allies and mentors within their industry, these leaders gain visibility and access to opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable, enhancing their career prospects.

Mentorship and professional networks play a critical role in the advancement of African female leaders. The findings highlight the critical role of support systems and mentorships in the career

progression and overall well-being of African Black female leaders. Mentorship emerged as a foundational element, providing guidance, emotional support, and career advocacy. Participants frequently mentioned how mentors helped them navigate the complexities of corporate environments, offered strategic advice, and acted as advocates for their career advancement.

Professional networks are also essential, offering a platform for sharing experiences, seeking advice, and gaining new perspectives. These networks provide not only practical support, such as job referrals and career advice, but also emotional support, creating a community of peers who understand the unique challenges faced by African Black female leaders.

Family support similarly plays a crucial role in participants' professional lives, offering emotional stability and practical assistance, such as help with childcare and other responsibilities. This support allows participants to focus more on their careers, manage stress, and maintain a healthier work-life balance. Balancing professional and personal life responsibilities is particularly challenging for African Black females, and family support plays a crucial role in this dynamic. Family support, especially from partners who share household responsibilities, is essential for maintaining women's mental health and mitigating work stress. Women who receive such support report fewer instances of depression and better overall health, highlighting the importance of a supportive home environment in enabling women to thrive professionally (Nelson & Burke, 2000).

The combined support from mentors, professional networks, and family thus help to mitigate the effects of workplace biases. These support systems are vital for building resilience, gaining confidence, and achieving career goals. Research indicates that having a trusted set of advisors and mentors is crucial for navigating workplace challenges, including microaggressions and biases, which African Black women frequently encounter (Burrell, 2022).

Studies show that Black women often face unique challenges in forming these networks due to stereotypes and a lack of role models, which further highlights the importance of intentional organisational support and mentorship programmes. In leadership development programmes, African Black women tend to rely more on peer networks for support, contrasting with their White male counterparts who more comfortably seek support from superiors, reflecting broader social dynamics of power and privilege. This reliance on peer networks is essential for their leadership development, as it helps mitigate the effects of social isolation and provides a

platform for shared experiences and strategies for overcoming workplace barriers (Lewis, 2023; Rosette et al., 2018).

Additionally, the lack of adequate organisational support and the need for impression management strategies among African Black women further highlight the critical role of mentorship in providing a sense of belonging and career satisfaction. Therefore, fostering mentorship and professional networks is not only beneficial but necessary for the career advancement of African Black female leaders, as it addresses the multifaceted challenges they face and promotes a more inclusive and supportive professional environment (Rosette et al., 2018).

Resilience and the ability to foster supportive team dynamics round out the necessary strategies. Resilience enables these leaders to withstand and overcome the additional scrutiny and biases they face, maintaining their mental fortitude in challenging situations. Meanwhile, fostering a supportive and collaborative team culture not only aids in their navigation of male-dominated spaces, but also sets a positive example for their colleagues. This inclusive approach helps to create an environment where all team members can thrive, thereby reinforcing the leader's position and promoting a more equitable workplace.

Moleko (2019) found that African Black females perceive gender as a significant barrier to their career progression, facing challenges rooted in stereotypes and biases within the workplace. The intersection of race and gender further compounds these obstacles, influencing how they are perceived and treated in professional settings. Black female leaders often struggle with gaining acceptance and authority in leadership roles due to preconceived notions about their capabilities. Cultural expectations and societal norms can also undermine their confidence and limit opportunities for advancement. In response, support systems and mentorship are crucial in helping them navigate these complexities and overcoming the barriers posed by gender and race.

6.4 Documented Experiences

The lived experiences of the participants illustrate a clear divergence from traditional leadership theories, particularly transformational and feminist leadership models. While these frameworks offer valuable insights into the challenges women face in leadership, they often fall short of capturing the unique and compounded difficulties that African Black women experience.

Transformational leadership is a style that focuses on inspiring and motivating followers to achieve common goals through a shared vision and values. It is characterised by four key components: individualised consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealised influence, all of which aim to empower followers to reach higher performance levels. This leadership approach is future-oriented, fostering commitment and creativity to strengthen organisations. Research suggests that women tend to exhibit transformational leadership more often than men, excelling in collaboration, cooperation, and intuitive problem-solving (Moleko, 2019).

Feminist leadership is a leadership approach grounded in feminist values, focusing on gender equality, inclusivity, empowerment, and challenging traditional gender norms and biases. It integrates feminist theory, emphasising the influence of gender on leadership practices and experiences. Recognising intersectionality, feminist leadership considers how race, class, and ethnicity intersect with gender to shape leadership challenges, acknowledging the unique experiences of women of colour and other marginalised groups. This model promotes empowerment, collaboration, and inclusivity, aiming to build equitable and diverse leadership. It challenges traditional male-dominated norms, dismantles systemic barriers, and values the lived experiences of women as critical to decision-making processes (Moorosi et al., 2018; Stead, 2013; Moleko, 2019).

These models typically focus on the broad struggles of women in leadership but fail to account for how race intersects with gender to create additional layers of discrimination. For African Black women, leadership roles are not only about navigating the gendered expectations of leadership, but about confronting the systemic racism that their white female counterparts may not face. The combination of sexism and racism adds significant complexity to their leadership journeys, requiring strategies and resilience that are distinct from what is typically discussed in conventional leadership theories.

The key differences between the participants' lived experiences and existing theories reveal a critical gap: current models do not adequately address intersectionality in the way in which race, gender, and other social identities overlap to create unique experiences of discrimination. Participants shared stories that emphasised how African Black female leaders must constantly prove their competence, often more than their peers. This continuous need for validation, often referred to as the "prove-it-again" bias, is compounded by racial and gendered microaggressions that undermine their authority and leadership. Additionally, they face

exclusion from critical decision-making processes and professional networks, further isolating them in their roles.

These stories point to the necessity of developing leadership models that better reflect the reality of African Black women's experiences. The current theories overlook the emotional labour involved in managing the exclusion, bias, and microaggressions that these women endure daily. A more inclusive and nuanced leadership model would not only acknowledge these challenges, but also provide frameworks in which African Black female leaders can thrive. This model must integrate intersectionality, recognising the interplay of race, gender, and other factors, to adequately support and represent the diverse challenges these women face in leadership positions.

The theme of striving for excellence and seeking recognition emerged prominently in the experiences of African Black female leaders, revealing their relentless drive to overcome barriers and prove their worth in corporate environments. This pursuit of excellence is not merely about personal ambition, but also about challenging and dismantling the pervasive stereotypes and biases that often undermine their capabilities. The participants' narratives highlighted a shared understanding that achieving excellence is crucial to gaining respect and recognition in workplaces where they are frequently underestimated and undervalued.

One of the key insights from the findings is the constant pressure these leaders face to perform at higher standards than their peers. Many participants described an environment where their competence is continually questioned, necessitating repeated demonstrations of their abilities to be taken seriously. This "prove-it-again" bias compelled them to work harder, pursue further qualifications, and consistently exceed expectations to establish their credibility and legitimacy. This relentless pursuit was driven by a need to validate their professional worth and dispel any doubts about their capabilities.

This drive for excellence often comes at a significant personal cost, however. Participants recounted instances where they had to sacrifice personal time, family commitments, and even their health to meet the high standards expected of them. The emotional and physical toll of maintaining such rigorous standards is considerable, yet these leaders persist, driven by a deep-seated determination to succeed and prove their detractors wrong. Their resilience in the face of such challenges is a testament to their strength and commitment to their professional goals.

Recognition, for these leaders, is not merely about accolades or titles; it is intrinsically linked to their sense of self-worth and professional identity. Participants spoke about the profound impact that acknowledgement of their efforts has on their morale and motivation. Being recognised for their contributions validates their hard work and reinforces their belief in their capabilities. It also provides a much-needed boost in environments where they often feel isolated and unsupported, highlighting the critical role that recognition plays in sustaining their drive for excellence. The pursuit of excellence also extends to how these leaders influence their teams and organisations. They set high standards not only for themselves but also for those they lead, fostering a culture of excellence and accountability. By modelling the behaviours and attitudes they value, these leaders inspire their teams to strive for high performance and merit-based success. This approach helps create environments where excellence is the primary criterion for advancement, challenging the status quo and promoting a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture.

Mentorship and support systems are pivotal on this journey of striving for excellence. Participants emphasised the importance of having mentors who provide guidance, support, and advocacy. These mentors play a critical role in helping them navigate the complexities of corporate life, offering strategic advice and helping them seize opportunities that might otherwise have been inaccessible. The support from mentors and professional networks is crucial in sustaining their drive for excellence, providing both practical assistance and emotional encouragement.

Despite their successes, many participants face persistent biases and stereotypes that undermine their achievements. They described how their accomplishments are often downplayed or attributed to external factors rather than their skills and efforts. This experience underscores the importance of striving for excellence not just to achieve personal goals, but also to challenge and change the narrative around Black female leadership in corporate spaces. By consistently demonstrating their competence and achieving high levels of performance, these leaders reshape perceptions and break down harmful stereotypes.

The findings also highlighted the role of resilience in this pursuit of excellence. The participants have demonstrated an unwavering commitment to their goals despite the obstacles they face, which is not just about enduring hardships but about actively pushing back on them, using each setback as motivation to strive harder and achieve more. Their stories illustrate how resilience and excellence are intertwined, each reinforcing the other in their professional journeys. This

resilience is a key factor in their ability to navigate and succeed in challenging corporate environments.

Creating a legacy of excellence is another important insight from the findings. Many participants expressed a desire to pave the way for future generations of African Black female leaders. They hope that their efforts to achieve and be recognised for their excellence will break down barriers and create more opportunities for those who follow them. This forward-looking perspective adds another layer of purpose to their pursuit of excellence, linking their personal achievements to a broader, collective goal of empowerment and representation. This desire to leave a lasting impact on their organisations and communities is a powerful motivator in their professional lives.

The pursuit of excellence and recognition among African Black female leaders is a multifaceted endeavour rooted in a desire to overcome biases, prove their worth, and create lasting change. Their stories of resilience, hard work, and a strategic use of support systems provide valuable insights into the challenges and triumphs of striving for excellence in corporate environments. These also findings underscore the importance of recognising and supporting the unique journeys of these leaders, as well as fostering a more inclusive and equitable corporate culture that values and celebrates their contributions. By understanding and addressing the specific challenges they face, organisations can better support African Black female leaders in their pursuit of excellence and recognition, ultimately benefiting from their diverse perspectives and exceptional talents.

Research has attributed this relentless pursuit of excellence among African Black female leaders to a combination of intrinsic motivations and external pressures. These women often strive to serve as role models and advocates for their communities, challenging pervasive stereotypes and demonstrating that African Black women can excel in leadership roles traditionally dominated by men and other racial groups. This drive is further fueled by the need to counteract the negative impacts of the “queen bee syndrome”, which seeks to sideline African Black women in leadership positions by portraying them as token affirmative action placements rather than recognising their genuine capabilities. Despite their efforts, African Black women face systemic barriers in the labour market, such as the “sticky floor”, “concrete ceiling” and “glass cliff”, which manifest as subtle forms of discrimination and bias that hold back their career advancement (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Kea-Edwards et al., 2023; Ramnund-Mansingh, 2022).

These barriers are compounded by cultural and societal expectations that often place additional burdens on women, such as domestic responsibilities and the need to navigate male-dominated organisational cultures. African Black females in leadership roles are frequently relegated to challenging and low-performing environments, a reflection of the broader societal racism that limits their opportunities. To overcome these obstacles, Black female leaders must consistently perform at higher standards, often outperforming their male counterparts to prove their competence and gain recognition. This relentless pursuit of excellence is not only a personal endeavour but also a strategic necessity to break through the systemic barriers that persist despite their efforts to excel (Kea-Edwards et al., 2023; Moorosi et al., 2018; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009).

The intersectionality of race and gender further complicates their leadership journey, as they must navigate the compounded effects of both forms of discrimination, making their path to success uniquely challenging compared to their White female and Black male counterparts. Therefore, the motivations behind their pursuit of excellence are deeply rooted in a desire to challenge stereotypes, serve as community advocates, and navigate a labour market troubled with systemic barriers that require them to consistently prove their worth and capabilities (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Kea-Edwards et al., 2023; Moorosi et al., 2018; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Ramnund-Mansingh, 2022).

The findings emphasise the importance of leadership styles and personal resilience in the success of African Black female leaders. Participants emphasised that their leadership styles, which are characterised by inclusivity, empathy, and resilience, were crucial in navigating corporate environments. These leaders often adopt a collaborative approach, valuing input from their teams and fostering a supportive work culture. This inclusive leadership style helps create a positive and productive environment where diversity is celebrated and all team members feel valued.

Personal resilience emerged as a key attribute that enables participants to overcome numerous challenges and biases in the workplace. Their resilience is honed through personal and professional experiences, equipping them with the mental strength to persist despite setbacks. This resilience enables them to maintain focus on their goals, adapt to changing circumstances, and lead by example, demonstrating perseverance and determination.

The combination of empathetic leadership and personal resilience not only contributes to their own career success, but also inspires and motivates their teams. These leaders are able to

navigate biases and foster an environment of trust and respect, which are essential for achieving organisational goals and driving positive change.

Jean-Marie et al. (2009) argued that African Black female leaders often adopt inclusive and empathetic leadership styles, which are deeply rooted in their cultural and personal experiences. These leaders emphasise understanding individuals holistically, showing empathy, and creating a supportive environment where team members feel valued and understood. For instance, one leader highlighted her empathetic approach by prioritising her team's personal well-being, recognising that if they are not okay in their personal lives, they cannot perform well professionally. This empathetic and inclusive leadership style is also reflected in the nurturing, sensitive, and cooperative attributes commonly associated with female leadership, which African female leaders confirm as applicable to them.

The concept of “Ubuntu”, which emphasises community and shared humanity, is often integrated into their leadership approach, blending African and Western philosophies to create a leadership style that is both caring and effective (Moleko, 2019).

Personal resilience plays a crucial role in overcoming professional challenges and biases for these leaders. Despite the progress made since the Civil Rights Act of 1991, subtle forms of discrimination, such as microaggressions, continue to hinder the advancement of Black women in leadership roles. However, their resilience, driven by a strong motivation to lead and a commitment to rectifying inequities, enables them to navigate these challenges successfully. They often develop a leadership style that is inclusive, builds consensus, and is collaborative, which helps them transcend racial and gender stereotypes and create opportunities for others (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Kea-Edwards et al., 2023).

Experiences of feeling empowered or disempowered in leadership roles are significantly influenced by organisational culture and support. An empowerment culture, where managers create an inclusive atmosphere and ensure equal training and recognition opportunities, can enhance morale and encourage employees to perform their best. However, many women, particularly African Black women, often face disempowerment due to systemic biases and a lack of support. For instance, African Black women frequently experience invisibility and are denied opportunities for recognition and leadership in high-value projects, which diminishes their sense of belonging and empowerment (Burrell, 2022; Cletus et al., 2018).

The above study findings are relevant to the South African context. Authority and empowerment are critical themes in the experiences of African Black female leaders, highlighting the challenges and strategies involved in asserting leadership and feeling empowered in their roles. These concepts are deeply intertwined with issues of recognition, respect, and organisational support. The insights from this study highlight the significance of these factors in shaping the professional journeys of these leaders.

One of the primary insights from the study is the frequent need for African Black female leaders to assert their authority to be taken seriously. Participants often described situations where their decisions and suggestions were overlooked or dismissed, only to be validated when echoed by male colleagues. This constant battle for recognition requires them to be assertive and resilient, demonstrating their capabilities to ensure their contributions are acknowledged.

The struggle for authority is compounded by the additional scrutiny and skepticism faced by African Black female leaders. Their decisions are often questioned more rigorously than those of their male counterparts, reflecting underlying biases and stereotypes. This heightened scrutiny necessitates a higher standard of performance and a continuous effort to prove their competence. The participants' experiences highlight the exhausting nature of this ongoing validation process. Organisational support is crucial in fostering empowerment, as women in male-dominated fields often report inadequate mentoring and social support, leading to lower confidence and higher turnover rates (Rosette et al., 2018).

However, other studies have found that Black female leaders often empower their teams by encouraging independence and providing necessary support, fostering a sense of ownership among subordinates. This empowerment through ownership helps create successful and autonomous team members. Yet many Black female leaders face challenges in asserting their authority, which is rooted in historical conditioning that has ingrained subservience to white authority figures. This makes it harder for them to challenge decisions or assert leadership, particularly in predominantly white work environments (Moleko, 2019).

The intersection of race, gender, and ethnicity plays a significant role in shaping Black women's leadership identity and experiences with authority. These overlapping factors influence how they navigate organisational cultures and affect how subordinates and peers perceive them. These perceptions, often shaped by race and gender biases, can influence the feedback they receive and the leadership style they employ, impacting their sense of empowerment. Furthermore, Black female leaders may encounter the "Pull Her Down"

syndrome, where other women do not support their leadership, further undermining their empowerment (Moleko, 2019; Domingue, 2015).

Mentorship and sponsorship emerged as crucial elements in gaining and maintaining authority in the workplace. Mentors and sponsors provide not only guidance and advice, but also act as advocates for their mentees, helping them navigate organisational politics and build credibility. These relationships are essential in fostering a sense of empowerment, enabling African Black female leaders to assert their authority more confidently. Building strong professional relationships and networks is another key strategy for asserting authority and feeling empowered. By connecting with influential figures and allies within their industries, participants are able to gain visibility and support, which bolsters their authority and helps them navigate challenges more effectively.

Educational and professional development are also pivotal in reinforcing authority and empowerment. The participants have pursued advanced degrees, certifications, and professional development programmes to enhance their knowledge and skills. This commitment to continuous learning has not only equipped them with the necessary tools to excel in their roles, but also demonstrates their dedication and competence, reinforcing their authority within their organisations.

To assert authority and overcome biases in decision-making processes, women can adopt several strategies. Engaging in impression management, maintaining a professional image, and concealing non-work identities can help, although it may come at the cost of personal satisfaction and organisational engagement. Additionally, creating networks and seeking mentorship, despite the discomfort it may cause, can provide the necessary guidance and support to navigate organisational landscapes (Rosette et al., 2018).

For this group of leaders, finding mentors and creating networks were key strategies, with their overarching message emphasising that they would not be where they are if it were not for the bold steps of facing the discomfort. Companies can also implement diversity initiatives that involve all employees in the formulation and execution process, helping to defend against resistance to change and fostering a sense of belonging. Research on women in academia and other sectors highlights the importance of resilience and the need for systemic changes to make environments more supportive and inclusive for women leaders. This is very necessary for corporate South Africa as well, across the various industries. (Cletus et al., 2018; Mabokela, 2001).

The findings highlight that effective leadership styles and personal resilience are pivotal for African Black female leaders in overcoming barriers, achieving career success, and fostering inclusive and supportive workplace cultures. These attributes enable them to navigate complex corporate landscapes and lead with confidence and integrity.

6.5 Class Dynamics

Socio-economic background played a pivotal role in shaping the leadership trajectories of the participants, with those from lower socio-economic environments encountering additional hurdles in establishing their legitimacy in leadership roles. Growing up in under-resourced communities, these women were instilled with a strong work ethic, but they were also acutely aware of the structural inequalities that limited their access to opportunities. The disparity between their upbringing and the environments they aspired to work in meant they often had to exert twice the effort to gain the same level of recognition as their peers from more privileged backgrounds. This need to prove themselves stemmed not only from their race and gender, but also from the class-based assumptions that devalued their capabilities in professional spaces.

The drive for continuous self-improvement was a recurring theme among the participants, with many feeling the pressure to constantly build their qualifications as a way to overcome biases related to their socio-economic backgrounds. These leaders recognised that educational advancement and professional development were essential to levelling the playing field. As a result, they pursued higher education and professional certifications not just as a personal goal, but as a necessary strategy to counteract the class-based obstacles that make it harder for them to ascend the leadership ranks. In doing so, they aimed to challenge preconceived notions about their capabilities and elevate their standing in environments where individuals from more affluent backgrounds are often favoured.

Black female leaders. Participants often cited their early life experiences and the values instilled by their families as critical factors shaping their professional journeys. These values provided a strong foundation, equipping them with the resilience, work ethic, and determination necessary to navigate the corporate landscape successfully.

Many participants highlighted how their upbringing emphasised the importance of education. Growing up in families where education was highly valued instilled in them a lifelong commitment to learning and self-improvement. This emphasis on education not only equipped them with the necessary knowledge and skills but also fostered a mindset of continuous growth.

As a result, these leaders pursued further qualifications and professional development opportunities to enhance their competence and credibility in their respective fields.

The role of family support was also crucial. Participants described how their families provided both emotional and practical support, enabling them to focus on their careers and change the narrative. Having a supportive and intentional family environment created a foundation that allowed these leaders to excel academically, thereby ensuring their professional success.

Early life challenges also played a significant role in shaping the resilience and determination of these leaders. Many participants spoke about overcoming various adversities during their upbringing, which taught them valuable lessons in perseverance and grit. These experiences built their mental fortitude, enabling them to handle the pressures and biases they encountered in their professional lives. The ability to overcome early challenges instilled a sense of confidence and self-efficacy that propelled them forward in their careers.

The influence of educational experiences extended beyond academic achievements. Participants noted that their educational journeys often involved navigating predominantly white institutions where they were among the few African Black students. These experiences taught them how to assert themselves and find their voice in environments where they were underrepresented. The skills and confidence gained from these experiences were crucial as they transitioned into corporate settings, where similar dynamics often persisted.

The values of hard work and integrity, instilled during their upbringing, were consistently highlighted as guiding principles in their professional lives. These values influenced their approach to leadership, emphasising the importance of ethical behaviour, transparency, and accountability. By adhering to these principles, these leaders earned the respect and trust of their colleagues and subordinates, reinforcing their credibility and effectiveness as leaders.

Participants further emphasised the importance of having role models and mentors during their formative years. Seeing family members or community leaders succeed despite facing similar challenges provided them with a sense of possibility and aspiration. These role models demonstrated that it was possible to overcome systemic barriers and achieve success, inspiring them to strive for excellence in their own careers.

The cultural context of their upbringing also played a significant role. Many participants grew up in communities that valued collective support and communal success. This cultural backdrop influenced their leadership styles, fostering a collaborative and inclusive approach.

They emphasised the importance of building strong, supportive teams and creating environments where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute. Education and upbringing also influenced the participants' perspectives on leadership and success; they viewed leadership not just as a position of authority, but as an opportunity to make a positive impact and uplift others. This perspective drives them to mentor and support other aspiring leaders, particularly those from similar backgrounds, creating a ripple effect of empowerment and success.

This highlights the profound impact of upbringing and education on the career trajectories and leadership approaches of African Black female leaders. The values, support, and experiences from their formative years equipped them with the resilience, determination, and skills needed to navigate and succeed in the corporate world. These insights highlight the importance of creating supportive environments and providing access to educational opportunities for future generations, ensuring that the next wave of leaders is prepared to overcome challenges and achieve their full potential.

Similarly, Roos (2020) noted that family values and early life experiences play a crucial role in shaping career paths and leadership styles, as they instill foundational principles and ethics that guide individuals throughout their professional journeys. In African contexts, principles that emphasise consultation, service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness, transparency, redress, and value for money are deeply rooted in the cultural value of Ubuntu, meaning “people first”. These principles underscore the importance of community and collective well-being, which are often imparted through family teachings and early life experiences. Education further solidifies these foundational values by providing the necessary knowledge and skills for professional growth. A robust educational framework equips individuals with critical thinking abilities, technical expertise, and a broader understanding of their field, which are essential for career advancement and effective leadership.

Likewise, early challenges and adversities encountered during one's formative years contribute significantly to developing resilience and a strong work ethic. Leaders who have faced historical challenges and adversities often develop mechanisms to overcome obstacles, which enhances their resilience and ability to navigate complex situations. This resilience is not only a personal asset but also a professional one, as it enables leaders to inspire and motivate their teams, fostering a culture of perseverance and determination. In summary, the interplay of family values, educational background, and early life challenges creates a comprehensive

foundation for career development and leadership, emphasising the importance of resilience, ethical conduct, and continuous learning in achieving professional success (Moleko, 2019).

For the interviewees, the pursuit of education and professional growth was about more than just career advancement; it was a way of ensuring they would not be sidelined due to their socio-economic backgrounds. Their awareness of the limitations imposed by their upbringing drove them to continuously seek opportunities for learning and self-development, which has become a defining feature of their leadership journeys as they navigate the intersection of class, race, and gender to assert their place in corporate leadership. Through their relentless pursuit of excellence, they have not only improved their own prospects, but also paved the way for others from similar backgrounds to follow in their footsteps.

6.6 Intersectionality

Understanding the leadership experiences of the participants requires recognising how their overlapping identities, such as race, gender, and sometimes age, contribute to the unique challenges they face. These women are often evaluated not just for their skills, but through the lens of societal biases linked to their identity. As African Black female leaders, they encounter higher levels of scrutiny and stricter standards than their white or male colleagues. This intersection of identities has shaped their leadership journeys, often leading to exclusion from important professional networks and limiting their opportunities for advancement. The combined impact of race and gender has frequently created barriers to recognition, forcing them to continuously reaffirm their competence in spaces where they are undervalued.

In response to these challenges, many of the participants have adopted leadership styles that emphasise empathy and community, often drawing on the values of Ubuntu. These leaders seek to cultivate environments within their teams that are supportive and inclusive, as well as grounded in mutual respect and understanding. Their ability to connect with others on a personal level is shaped by their intersectional identities, enabling them to create a sense of belonging and camaraderie in their workplaces. By leading with empathy, they have effectively built stronger, more cohesive teams, all while managing the pressures of exclusion and marginalisation.

Moreover, these leaders have turned their unique challenges into opportunities for driving positive change within their organisations. Their first-hand experience with discrimination and exclusion has heightened their awareness of systemic issues that impact not only themselves, but also others around them. By integrating these insights into their leadership approach, they

are able to foster diversity, inclusivity, and equity in their organisations. Their leadership styles are transformative, using the very obstacles they face as a source of strength to create more inclusive environments.

The insights from the study reveal the profound impact of intersectionality and identity on the experiences of African Black female leaders. For these leaders, their intersectional identities significantly influence their professional journeys, shaping both the challenges they face and the strengths they bring to their roles.

One of the most striking insights is the dual burden of race and gender discrimination. Participants frequently described how their identities as both Black and female subject them to unique biases that their counterparts do not face. This dual discrimination often manifests in skepticism about their capabilities, resulting in a constant need to prove their competence. The pressure to perform at a higher standard than their peers was a recurring theme, underscoring the relentless scrutiny they face.

Additionally, the concept of “prove-it-again” bias was particularly prevalent among the participants. This phenomenon involves having to repeatedly demonstrate one's abilities to be seen as competent, a burden less experienced by their white male counterparts. The intersection of ageism and gendered racism compounds this bias, with younger-looking Black women facing additional scrutiny and needing to employ specific strategies to assert their expertise and legitimacy in professional settings.

Another significant insight was the impact of socio-economic background on the participants' professional experiences. Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds often had to overcome additional barriers to achieve success. Their upbringing instilled a strong work ethic and resilience, but it also highlighted the systemic inequalities that persisted in their professional lives. These leaders had to navigate not only racial and gender biases, but also class-based biases that further complicated their career trajectories.

The participants' narratives further highlighted the importance of identity awareness in navigating professional environments. Understanding how their intersecting identities influence their experiences enables these leaders to develop strategies to manage biases more effectively. This awareness helps them advocate for themselves and others, using their unique perspectives to drive change within their organisations. By leveraging their intersectional identities, they are able to address injustices and promote more inclusive practices.

The role of physical appearance, including aspects such as skin tone and hair texture, is another critical factor influencing the experiences of African Black female leaders. Participants spoke about the biases they encounter based on their appearance, with certain hairstyles and physical features being deemed less professional. These biases add another layer of discrimination, requiring leaders to navigate the societal standards of beauty that often marginalise Black women's natural features.

Participants also discussed the emotional and psychological toll of navigating multiple layers of bias. The constant need to prove themselves and defend their identity took a significant toll on their mental health. Many described the necessity of developing coping mechanisms to manage stress and maintain their well-being. This included building strong support networks, engaging in self-care practices, and seeking mentorship from those who understand their unique challenges.

This study further highlighted the role of intersectionality in shaping leadership styles. African Black female leaders often draw on their diverse experiences to adopt inclusive and empathetic leadership approaches. Their ability to understand and navigate complex social dynamics allows them to create supportive environments for their teams. This intersectional perspective enriches their leadership practices, making them more in harmony with the needs of diverse team members and better equipped to foster a culture of inclusion.

Coping strategies play a crucial role in the professional and personal lives of African Black female leaders, helping them navigate the unique challenges they face in corporate environments. These strategies are essential for managing stress, maintaining mental and physical health, and sustaining their professional and personal lives. The insights from the study highlight various coping mechanisms that these leaders employ to thrive in demanding and often biased workplaces.

Building and maintaining strong support networks is one of the primary coping strategies identified in the study. These networks include mentors, colleagues, and family members who provide emotional and practical support. Having trusted individuals to confide in and seek advice from allows African Black female leaders to better handle the pressures of their roles. These support systems offer a safe space to discuss challenges and receive encouragement, which is crucial for their mental well-being. Mentors, in particular, provide career guidance and emotional support, helping mentees navigate the complexities of corporate environments and offering insights into handling difficult situations.

Professional networks also serve as a significant coping mechanism. These networks provide a platform for African Black female leaders to share their experiences, seek advice, and gain new perspectives. By connecting with peers who face similar challenges, they find solidarity and support, creating a sense of community. This communal approach provides a vital support system that enhances their professional journey.

Engaging in self-care practices is another crucial coping strategy. Participants emphasised the importance of activities that promote physical and mental well-being, such as exercise, meditation, and hobbies. Regular physical activity, such as running or yoga, helps reduce stress and improve overall health, while meditation and mindfulness practices provide a way to manage anxiety and maintain a positive outlook. Hobbies like gardening, painting, and reading offer a mental break from work-related stress and contribute to a balanced lifestyle. Nelson and Burke (2000) argued that the above practices are very important for females, given that women report higher stress levels and greater responsibilities both at work and home, which can negatively impact their health if not managed properly.

Maintaining a positive outlook and practicing resilience are key components of the coping strategies employed by African Black female leaders. The ability to stay focused on their goals and not let biases deter them is crucial for their success. Participants spoke about the importance of developing a thick skin and using setbacks as motivation to work harder and achieve their objectives. This mental fortitude enables them to navigate challenges and maintain their drive. The resilience they develop helps them persist in the face of adversity and continue to excel in their roles.

Faith and spirituality also play a significant role in the coping strategies of many African Black female leaders. Regular prayer, attending religious gatherings, and relying on spiritual beliefs provide comfort and strength. Faith offers a sense of purpose and perspective, helping these leaders stay grounded and focused on their long-term goals. The support of a faith community can also be a source of encouragement and belonging, helping them to cope with the emotional and psychological demands of their leadership roles.

Developing a robust social life is essential for coping with the demands of leadership. Social activities with friends and peers provide a necessary break from work and help maintain a healthy work-life balance. Engaging in social interactions outside of the workplace offers a different perspective and helps leaders to recharge mentally and emotionally. This balance is crucial for preventing burnout and maintaining long-term well-being. A strong social life

provides a sense of normalcy and relaxation amidst the pressures of leadership. A high level of alcohol consumption was highlighted by some participants, albeit covertly, pointing to some participants feeling the need to escape from the everyday pressures and realities.

Some of the research participants displayed remarkable courage during the interviews as they candidly shared the difficult paths that unexpectedly led them to grapple with alcohol dependence. Their willingness to open up about their journeys not only unveiled the depth of the challenges they faced, but also served as a touching reminder of the complex connections between personal struggles and professional experiences.

Nelson and Burke (2000) shed light on the coping mechanisms adopted by women in leadership positions, revealing that some women turn to alcohol and smoking to mitigate these heightened stress levels. The choice to resort to these as stress-alleviating measures underlines the severity of the stressors that women in leadership roles grapple with. It reflects a coping mechanism that, while providing temporary relief, may pose long-term health risks and contribute to a cycle of dependence as individuals seek solace from the escalating demands placed on them.

Lastly, the participants' stories highlighted the potential for intersectionality to drive organisational change. By leveraging their unique perspectives, African Black female leaders are able to challenge the status quo and advocate for more equitable practices. Their experiences position them as powerful agents of change, who are capable of addressing systemic biases and promoting diversity within their organisations. This potential for impact shows the importance of supporting and empowering African Black female leaders to leverage their intersectional identities for the benefit of their organisations and broader society.

In summary, the insights from the study highlight the profound impact of intersectionality and identity on the experiences of African Black female leaders. These leaders navigate a complex landscape of biases and barriers, but their unique perspectives and resilience also position them as powerful agents of change. By understanding and addressing the interconnected nature of their identities, organisations can better support African Black female leaders and leverage their strengths to foster more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

The above study findings are echoed in other studies, i.e., that the intersection of race, gender, and other aspects of identity creates a multifaceted set of challenges for Black women in leadership roles. These women often face dual pressures from both racial and gender biases, which significantly impact their leadership experiences. For instance, high-achieving Black

women in educational leadership frequently encounter isolation, alienation, and negative interactions with faculty and peers, which can jeopardise their academic and professional success (Davis, 2018).

The concept of intersectionality, which positions race and gender as interlocking social identity categories, is crucial for understanding these unique challenges. Black women leaders often have to navigate the “queen bee syndrome,” where institutional factors and social structures inhibit their ability to support other women, further complicating their leadership journey. Additionally, leadership development programmes (LDPs) often fail to address the specific needs of African Black women, who report a lack of support and developmental opportunities compared to their White counterparts (Lewis, 2023; Ramnund-Mansingh, 2022).

Despite these challenges, Black women bring unique perspectives and resilience to their roles due to their intersectional identities. Their experiences of overcoming systemic barriers and subtle forms of discrimination, such as microaggressions and subtle biases, equip them with a robust sense of community and a collaborative leadership style rooted in principles like Ubuntu, which emphasises interconnectedness and mutual support. This resilience is further demonstrated by their higher likelihood of aspiring to leadership roles compared to White women, despite the persistent underrepresentation in top leadership positions. The unique lived experiences of Black women, shaped by the intersection of racial and gender oppression, provide them with a distinct worldview and a strong sense of agency, which can be leveraged to foster inclusive and effective leadership practices.

This study provides a detailed view into the nuances applicable to African black females in corporate South Africa, expands existing theory and provides context as to why government interventions such as affirmative action have not yet addressed the issues of underrepresentation in corporate South Africa.

6.7 Pathways to leadership

Black female leaders are diverse and often characterised by unique challenges and opportunities that shape their professional journeys. These pathways highlight the importance of resilience, determination, and strategic networking in overcoming systemic barriers and achieving leadership positions. Participants in the study revealed various routes they took to ascend to leadership roles, emphasising the significance of mentorship, professional networks, and personal drive in navigating their careers.

Mentorship emerged as a crucial component in the leadership pathways of many African Black female leaders. Mentors provided not only guidance and advice but also critical advocacy and support that helped participants navigate the complexities of their professional environments. These relationships often went beyond mere career advice, offering emotional support and opening doors to new opportunities. The guidance from mentors helped participants make strategic career decisions and provided them with the confidence to pursue leadership roles.

Professional networks played an equally vital role in the leadership journeys of these women. Building and maintaining strong professional relationships enabled them to access resources, gain visibility, and receive support from peers and industry leaders. Networking facilitated introductions to influential figures who could advocate for their career advancement and provided a platform for sharing experiences and strategies for overcoming challenges. These networks often served as a lifeline, offering both practical and emotional support in navigating the professional landscape.

Participants frequently mentioned the importance of strategic career moves and taking advantage of opportunities that arose, even when these opportunities were outside their initial career plans. Flexibility and a willingness to explore different roles and industries were common themes among the leaders. This adaptability allowed them to gain diverse experiences and skill sets, which proved invaluable in their ascent to leadership positions. Their career paths often involved lateral moves, role expansions, and taking on challenging projects to demonstrate their capabilities. Another significant factor in the pathways to leadership was the continuous pursuit of education and professional development. Many participants pursued advanced degrees, certifications, and professional development programmes to enhance their knowledge and skills. This commitment to lifelong learning not only equipped them with the necessary tools to excel in their roles but also demonstrated their dedication and ambition to potential employers and colleagues. The pursuit of education was seen as a way to level the playing field and counteract biases that questioned their competence.

Resilience and perseverance were recurring themes in the narratives of African Black female leaders. The ability to bounce back from setbacks, learn from failures, and maintain a positive outlook was essential for their career progression. Their resilience was not only a personal asset but also inspired those around them, fostering a culture of perseverance and determination within their teams. Family support also played a critical role in the leadership pathways of many participants. The encouragement and backing from family members provided a strong

foundation that helped them navigate the demands of their careers. This support came in various forms, including emotional encouragement, practical assistance with household responsibilities, and financial support for educational pursuits. Having a supportive family network allowed participants to focus more on their professional growth and less on managing personal challenges alone.

The study also highlighted the importance of advocacy and sponsorship in the career advancement of African Black female leaders. Sponsors, often senior leaders within the organisation, played a pivotal role in promoting their protégés' careers by advocating for their advancement and providing opportunities for visibility. These sponsors helped break down barriers and facilitate access to leadership roles that might otherwise have been inaccessible. The role of sponsors was crucial in navigating organisational politics and gaining a foothold in leadership positions.

The pathways to leadership for African Black female leaders were also influenced by their ability to leverage their unique perspectives and experiences. Their backgrounds provided them with a distinctive viewpoint that enriched their leadership approach and contributed to innovative problem-solving. This ability to draw from diverse experiences allowed them to connect with a wide range of stakeholders and build inclusive teams that valued different perspectives. Their unique insights were often a key factor in their leadership effectiveness.

The importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment was emphasised as a critical aspect of the leadership journey. Participants recognised the need to foster a culture where diversity is celebrated, and all team members feel valued and included. By advocating for inclusive practices and policies, these leaders not only enhanced their own leadership effectiveness but also contributed to the broader organisational culture. This commitment to inclusivity was seen as essential for driving organisational success and ensuring that future generations of leaders could thrive.

The pathways to leadership for African Black female leaders are shaped by a combination of mentorship, professional networks, continuous education, resilience, family support, advocacy, the need to prove competence, leveraging unique perspectives, and fostering inclusive environments. These elements collectively highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of their leadership journeys, underscoring the importance of support systems, strategic decision-making, and a commitment to excellence in achieving leadership success.

Research indicates that organisations with diverse leadership and cultures exhibit higher productivity and performance, with firms having more diverse senior leadership being 33% more profitable than their less diverse counterparts. Diverse career paths and strategies for career advancement are crucial for fostering innovation and maintaining competitiveness in today's dynamic business environment. This profitability is attributed to the multiplicity of problem-solving approaches, ideological perspectives, and innovative ideas that diverse groups bring to the table (Burrell, 2022; Cletus et al., 2018).

For African Black women, however, career advancement is often hindered by intersectional invisibility and double jeopardy due to sexism and racism, which significantly impacts their leadership opportunities. To counter these challenges, mentorship and professional networks play a significant role. Having a trusted set of advisors can provide strategies for dealing with workplace microaggressions and navigating corporate environments. Mentorship, particularly from diverse mentors, is essential for career development, offering both upward and traditional mentoring opportunities that amplify Black women's voices and experiences while providing advocacy and sponsorship. Affinity groups and formal mentoring programmes can further enhance career development by opening communication lines between workers and management, identifying leadership talent, and providing feedback to leadership (Burrell, 2022; Cletus et al., 2018; Johnson & Thomas, 2012).

However, the availability of mentors remains a challenge, with many women and men acknowledging the critical role of mentors in career success but reporting low levels of satisfaction with their availability. Cross-gender mentoring relationships, while valuable, can present unique challenges such as social distance and discomfort, highlighting the need for more female mentors in senior positions. Organisations can address these issues by creating formal mentoring programmes, developing diverse hiring and selection committees, and establishing recruiting champions focused on recruiting previously disadvantaged groups to ensure fairness and equity in the selection process. By understanding the historical and social realities that affect Black women's career trajectories, organisations can improve succession planning and create more inclusive models of leadership development that recognise and support the unique challenges faced by these women (Burrell, 2022; Catalyst, 2004b; Nelson & Burke, 2000).

6.8 Ideal leadership experiences

The insights from this study illuminate the ideal leadership experiences envisioned by African Black female leaders, emphasising the importance of inclusivity, support, and opportunities for professional growth. These ideal leadership environments are characterised by mutual respect, trust, empowerment, and a strong emphasis on diversity and collaboration. Participants expressed a desire for leadership experiences that not only recognise their contributions, but also provide the resources and autonomy necessary for effective leadership.

One of the core aspects of ideal leadership experiences is the presence of mutual respect and trust between leaders and their teams. Participants emphasised that an environment where their expertise and contributions are valued is crucial for their professional satisfaction and effectiveness. This respect and trust form the foundation of a positive and productive work environment, where leaders can confidently make decisions and drive their teams toward success. The participants' narratives highlight that respect and trust are not merely about professional interactions but also about recognising the unique challenges and perspectives that African Black female leaders bring to the table.

Empowerment emerged as another significant component of ideal leadership experiences. Leaders expressed the need to feel empowered to make autonomous decisions and lead their teams effectively. This empowerment comes from having the authority to make strategic decisions and the support of higher management to implement those decisions. Participants noted that feeling empowered boosts their confidence and enables them to lead with conviction. Moreover, empowered leaders are better equipped to inspire and motivate their teams, fostering a culture of accountability and high performance.

Inclusivity and diversity are fundamental to the ideal leadership experiences envisioned by African Black female leaders. They aspire to work in environments where diverse perspectives are not only welcomed but actively sought. This inclusivity ensures that all team members feel valued and are encouraged to contribute their unique insights. Participants highlighted that an inclusive workplace culture enhances creativity and innovation, leading to better decision-making and problem-solving. Additionally, diversity in leadership teams helps address the varied needs of a diverse workforce and customer base, making the organisation more effective and responsive.

Collaboration and teamwork are also integral to the ideal leadership experiences. Participants expressed a preference for leadership styles that promote collaboration and collective problem-solving. They believe that effective leaders are those who can build cohesive teams and foster a spirit of cooperation. This collaborative approach not only enhances team dynamics but also ensures that diverse viewpoints are considered, leading to more comprehensive and effective solutions. By encouraging teamwork, leaders can create an environment where everyone feels invested in the success of the organisation.

The importance of professional development opportunities cannot be overstated in the context of ideal leadership experiences. Participants highlighted the need for continuous learning and growth, facilitated by access to training programmes, mentorship, and career advancement opportunities. They believe that organisations should invest in their development, providing resources and support to enhance their skills and knowledge. This investment in professional development not only benefits the individual leaders but also strengthens the overall leadership capacity of the organisation.

Supportive leadership is another critical element identified by the participants. They value leaders who are approachable, open to feedback, and willing to provide guidance and support. This supportive approach helps build trust and loyalty within the team, encouraging team members to seek advice and share their concerns. Participants noted that supportive leaders are instrumental in creating a positive work environment, where employees feel safe and motivated to perform at their best. This support extends beyond professional guidance to include emotional and psychological support, recognising the holistic needs of team members.

Recognition and appreciation for their contributions are essential aspects of the ideal leadership experiences for African Black female leaders. Participants expressed the need for their efforts to be acknowledged and valued. This recognition can take various forms, including verbal praise, awards, and opportunities for career advancement. Acknowledging their hard work and achievements not only boosts their morale but also reinforces their commitment to the organisation. Recognition is seen as a powerful motivator that drives leaders to continue striving for excellence.

The ability to balance work and personal life is a crucial consideration in ideal leadership experiences. Participants emphasised the importance of having a supportive work environment that allows them to manage their professional responsibilities without compromising their personal well-being. They believe that organisations should offer flexible work arrangements

and support systems that help leaders maintain a healthy work-life balance. This balance is vital for their overall well-being and enables them to perform effectively in their roles without experiencing burnout.

Ethical leadership and integrity are also highly valued in the ideal leadership experiences. Participants expressed a desire to work in environments where ethical behaviour and integrity are prioritised. They believe that leaders should set an example by adhering to high ethical standards and promoting transparency and accountability. This ethical approach fosters a culture of trust and respect, encouraging team members to act with integrity in their professional interactions. Ethical leadership is seen as a cornerstone of effective and sustainable organisational practices.

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of having a clear vision and direction in their leadership experiences. They believe that effective leaders are those who can articulate a compelling vision and guide their teams towards achieving it. This vision provides a sense of purpose and direction, aligning the efforts of all team members towards common goals. Participants noted that a clear vision helps them stay focused and motivated, ensuring that they can navigate challenges and drive their teams to success.

In summary, the ideal leadership experiences for African Black female leaders are characterised by mutual respect, empowerment, inclusivity, collaboration, professional development, supportive leadership, recognition, work-life balance, ethical behaviour, and a clear vision. These elements are essential for creating an environment where African Black female leaders can thrive and contribute effectively to their organisations. The insights from the study underscore the importance of these factors in fostering a positive and productive leadership experience, ultimately benefiting both the leaders and their organisations.

Catalyst (2004b) revealed that having a supportive environment that acknowledges their contribution is key for women leaders. Having autonomy was another critical factor, with participants expressing a desire for the freedom to make decisions and implement strategies without excessive bureaucratic constraints. This autonomy allows leaders to tailor their approaches to the unique needs of their departments and institutions, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and job satisfaction. Recognition, both formal and informal, was also deemed essential, as it validates the leaders' efforts and achievements, boosting their morale and motivation. Participants reflected on the ideal leadership environment as one that is inclusive, equitable, and collaborative, where diverse perspectives are valued and leaders are empowered

to drive positive change. This study provides an in-depth look into the desired leadership practices and workplace environments in which African Black female leaders can thrive.

7 CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary of findings

The study captured the essence of the lived experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa, revealing why these women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions despite affirmative action policies and CEE assessments. Their experiences are often negative, marked by constant challenges, oppression, and exclusion due to their race and gender. These experiences differ significantly from those of White females, with African Black females facing higher performance standards. The study shows that existing theories on these issues are relevant in South Africa, but require expansion to address unique local dynamics, including the historical context of Apartheid.

7.1.1 *Race Dynamics*

Race plays a significant role in shaping how African Black female leaders are perceived in corporate environments, especially regarding their legitimacy. Despite holding advanced qualifications and demonstrating their competence, these women often face increased scrutiny and the need to continuously prove themselves due to their race. This ongoing need to validate their abilities (referred to as the "prove-it-again" bias) leads to emotional and mental exhaustion as they navigate predominantly white corporate spaces. Their efforts are frequently subjected to racialised scepticism, forcing them to constantly work harder than their peers to gain recognition. These challenges are further compounded by discriminatory perceptions of their physical appearance, such as hairstyles, which become focal points of bias and further marginalise them in professional settings.

This persistent scrutiny and marginalisation affect not only their personal and emotional well-being but also their ability to advance within corporate hierarchies. Many females in this study noted how their leadership contributions were often devalued or unrecognised, even when their efforts directly improved organisational diversity or performance. They found themselves navigating racialised expectations while balancing professional responsibilities, resulting in a continuous struggle to assert their legitimacy in leadership roles. Despite these barriers, the participants demonstrated resilience through continuous self-improvement, pursuing further qualifications and professional development to counter the biases they faced.

Beyond self-improvement, these women were acutely aware that achieving recognition requires more than qualifications; it demands exceptional performance and dedication. Many participants highlighted how they consistently had to exceed expectations to gain the same

recognition as their peers. Additionally, they faced exclusion from key professional networks and were often subject to "tightrope" bias, where they had to balance assertiveness with likeability, all while managing the emotional labour of navigating exclusion and microaggressions in predominantly white spaces. Ultimately, these experiences underscore the need for organisations to implement comprehensive diversity and inclusion policies that address the unique challenges African Black female leaders face, ensuring their contributions are recognised and valued.

7.1.2 *Gender Dynamics*

Racial and gender biases significantly impede the career progression of African Black female leaders, who often find themselves navigating the "tightrope" bias, where they must balance assertiveness with likability. This balancing act can lead to exclusion from key decision-making processes, leaving them at a disadvantage in male-dominated environments. Gender and race intersect to create additional barriers, limiting upward mobility in corporate spaces that are not designed to support women, particularly Black women, in leadership roles. The simultaneity of race and gender in their identity cannot be ignored, as both factors contribute to how they are evaluated and treated in professional settings. These challenges often force African Black female leaders to continuously prove their competence, impacting their personal well-being and job satisfaction.

Balancing work and personal life emerged as a critical factor for the participants, many of whom face significant challenges juggling their professional and family responsibilities. The pressure to excel at work while maintaining personal obligations – many of which are gendered – leads to stress and exhaustion, which are further compounded by societal expectations. Family support, including help from partners and extended family, play a crucial role in enabling the participants to manage their dual roles. Mentorship and professional networks are also essential in navigating these barriers. By providing emotional and practical support, these systems help to mitigate the effects of workplace bias and exclusion. The participants also highlighted the importance of building resilient and inclusive teams and fostering environments where all members can thrive, thereby reinforcing their leadership roles and promoting a more equitable workplace.

7.1.3 *Documented Experiences*

The lived experiences of African Black female leaders highlight a divergence from traditional leadership theories, such as transformational and feminist leadership models, which often fail

to address the compounded challenges they face. While transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating teams through shared vision and values, it does not adequately account for how race and gender intersect to create additional barriers for Black women in leadership. Similarly, feminist leadership emphasises gender equality and inclusivity, but tends to overlook the racial dimensions that shape the experiences of African Black women in corporate spaces. Both models fall short of capturing the full complexity of intersectionality that these women navigate.

For African Black female leaders, leadership is not only about overcoming gendered expectations, but also about confronting the systemic racism that their white female counterparts may not face. Their leadership journeys are marked by the need to repeatedly prove their competence in environments where they are subject to heightened scrutiny due to both their race and gender. This "prove-it-again" bias, coupled with racial and gendered microaggressions, places them in a unique position where they must work harder to gain the same recognition as others. Their stories reflect a critical gap in current leadership models, which do not adequately account for the emotional labour and exclusion they endure.

The participants' experiences highlight the need for a more nuanced leadership model that integrates intersectionality. They shared how their race and gender combine to create additional challenges, from exclusion from professional networks to increased scrutiny of their decisions and leadership abilities. To thrive in such environments, African Black female leaders have developed resilience and employed strategies such as building strong professional relationships, pursuing continuous education, and fostering inclusive teams. Their resilience, shaped by the challenges they face, not only helps them succeed, but also drives them to create more inclusive and supportive work cultures for others.

The findings reveal that traditional leadership models must evolve to consider the intersectionality of race and gender, particularly in how these identities shape the experiences of African Black female leaders. A more inclusive leadership framework would address the unique barriers they face and provide tools to help them thrive in corporate environments. These leaders' relentless pursuit of excellence, coupled with their ability to foster empathy and community within their teams, offers valuable insights for developing leadership models that better reflect the diversity of challenges in today's workplaces.

7.1.4 Class Dynamics

The participants' socio-economic backgrounds played a crucial role in shaping their leadership journeys, with those who came from underprivileged environments facing additional challenges in establishing legitimacy in their leadership roles. Growing up in disadvantaged communities, they developed a strong work ethic, but they were also aware of the structural barriers that limited their access to opportunities. The gap between their upbringing and the professional environments they aspired to enter meant that they often had to exert extra effort to achieve the same level of recognition as peers from more privileged backgrounds. This constant need to prove themselves stemmed from biases not only related to their race and gender, but also their class.

Continuous self-improvement was a key theme for many participants, as they pursued higher education and professional development to counteract the biases associated with their socio-economic status. The drive for additional qualifications was not simply a personal goal but a strategic necessity. By obtaining advanced degrees and certifications, they aimed to level the playing field and challenge preconceived notions about their abilities. This pursuit of education and professional growth enabled them to assert their legitimacy in environments where individuals from more affluent backgrounds were often favoured.

The participants' upbringing and educational experiences significantly influenced their leadership styles. Family values, particularly an emphasis on hard work and integrity, provided a foundation that guided them throughout their careers. Many shared how their families instilled in them the importance of education, which drove their lifelong commitment to learning. A focus on continuous improvement shaped their leadership approach, leading them to create inclusive environments that empower others. Additionally, early life challenges helped them build resilience, enabling them to navigate corporate spaces where they face both gendered and racial biases.

Mentorship and role models were also pivotal in shaping their career paths. Participants frequently mentioned how seeing family members or community leaders succeed despite similar challenges inspired them to strive for success. The cultural values of Ubuntu, emphasising collective success and community support, deeply influenced their leadership styles, encouraging collaboration and inclusivity. These early experiences, combined with their pursuit of education and professional development, equipped them with the resilience,

determination, and skills to succeed in corporate leadership and empower others from similar backgrounds.

7.1.5 Intersectionality

The leadership experiences of the African Black female participants revealed how the intersection of race, gender, and, in some cases, age, creates a unique set of challenges. These women are often evaluated not just on their leadership skills but also through the lens of societal biases attached to their identities. The combination of race and gender results in heightened scrutiny, stricter standards, and exclusion from key professional networks, limiting their opportunities for career advancement. The necessity to continually prove their competence in spaces where they are undervalued demonstrates the impact of these intersecting identities on their leadership journeys.

In response to these challenges, many of the participants adopted leadership styles focused on empathy and community, often drawing from the values of Ubuntu. This approach helped them create inclusive, supportive environments within their teams, fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie. Their ability to connect personally with others was deeply influenced by their intersectional experiences, enabling them to lead with empathy and foster stronger, more cohesive teams. This leadership approach not only benefited their teams but also helped them navigate the pressures of exclusion and marginalization.

Also, the participants used their experiences of discrimination and exclusion to drive positive change within their organisations; their awareness of systemic biases allowed them to advocate for diversity, inclusivity, and equity, making their leadership transformative. By addressing these systemic challenges, they were able to create more inclusive environments, utilising their intersectional identities as a source of strength rather than a barrier to success.

This study highlights the importance of understanding intersectionality in shaping African Black female leaders' experiences. Their identities, which intersect race, gender, and class, significantly influenced their professional journeys and the challenges they face. Despite these barriers, their resilience, empathy, and inclusive leadership styles not only enable them to overcome obstacles, but also position them as powerful agents of change within their organisations. Through their leadership, they are able to promote a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture, highlighting the potential of intersectionality to drive systemic change.

7.1.6 Pathways to leadership

The leadership journeys of African Black female leaders are shaped by resilience, determination, and strategic networking, as they navigate unique challenges to ascend to leadership roles. These women face systemic barriers linked to their identities. However, these women overcome obstacles and forge paths to success through mentorship, professional networks, and personal determination. Mentorship proves to be a key factor, offering not only guidance and emotional support but also opportunities that help them navigate the complexities of their careers. These relationships provide more than just advice; they also offer advocacy, helping participants strategically progress in their professional environments.

Professional networks are equally crucial, granting access to opportunities, enhancing visibility, and offering support from peers and mentors. Networking enables these women to connect with influential figures who can advocate for their career growth and provide platforms for sharing experiences and strategies for overcoming challenges. In addition to mentorship and networking, flexibility and adaptability have been essential for navigating their career journeys. Participants frequently embraced lateral moves, took on challenging projects, and explored diverse roles that enriched their experience and showcased their leadership potential.

Another common theme in their leadership journeys is continuous self-improvement through education and professional development. Many participants pursued advanced degrees and certifications to not only expand their knowledge but also counteract biases and prove their competence in environments where they may be undervalued. This dedication to lifelong learning underscores their determination to overcome the intersectional barriers of race, gender, and socio-economic background. Family support also played a significant role in their success, offering emotional and practical help that enabled them to focus on their careers and navigate challenges more effectively. A combination of mentorship, networking, education, and inclusivity defines their leadership journeys and highlights the multifaceted approach they use to navigate the complexities of corporate leadership.

7.1.7 Ideal Leadership Experiences

This study highlights the ideal leadership experiences envisioned by African Black female leaders, emphasising the need for inclusivity, empowerment, and professional growth.

Participants described environments where mutual respect, trust, collaboration, and recognition of their contributions are foundational. They expressed a desire for leadership settings that value their perspectives and provide the autonomy to lead effectively. In these environments, leaders are trusted to make decisions and drive their teams toward success, creating a positive and productive atmosphere. This mutual respect is essential, as it acknowledges not just their professional capabilities, but also the unique challenges they face as African Black women in leadership roles.

Empowerment was another key component, with participants expressing the importance of feeling empowered to make autonomous decisions and lead with confidence. This empowerment enables leaders to inspire their teams, fostering a culture of accountability and high performance. Inclusivity and diversity were equally crucial, with participants aspiring to work in environments where diverse perspectives are actively sought and valued. Such inclusive workplaces encourage creativity and innovation, ensuring that all team members feel empowered to contribute meaningfully to the organisation's success.

Collaboration and teamwork were also central to the ideal leadership experiences. Participants valued leadership styles that promote collective problem-solving and a cooperative team dynamic, ensuring that diverse viewpoints are considered. Professional development is another important factor, as the participants seek continuous learning opportunities through mentorship, training, and career advancement. These opportunities are seen as essential for both personal growth and enhancing the overall leadership capacity of their organisations.

The participants also emphasised the importance of balancing their work and personal lives, advocating for supportive environments that allow them to manage their professional responsibilities without compromising their well-being. They value leaders who are approachable and supportive, providing both professional guidance and emotional support. Recognition for their efforts, ethical leadership, and having a clear vision are also critical for their ideal leadership experiences. These factors collectively create an environment where African Black female leaders can thrive, contribute effectively, and drive positive change within their organisations.

This research has provided insights into the lived experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa. The research findings of this study demonstrate that the challenges they face cannot be neatly captured within the frameworks provided by feminist theories. While feminist theories provide crucial insights into gender dynamics within professional spheres, the

experiences of African Black females are significantly nuanced due to the complex interplay of multiple subordinate identities.

Acknowledging the multiple subordinates carried by African Black females is paramount for understanding their complex navigation through corporate structures. These intersectional identities, encompassing race, gender, class, and age, collectively shape the unique challenges and opportunities they encounter in leadership positions. The struggles faced by African Black female leaders are not isolated to a single dimension, but are the product of the convergence of various societal dynamics. This research has therefore addressed the main research question:

What are the lived experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa?

The research further answered the sub-research questions and addressed constructs in existing literature. It also contributed new themes to the existing literature constructs that are specific to environments with historical contexts of racial discrimination, such as South Africa with its history of Apartheid.

The diagram of key themes as presented in Figure 8 is a framework that can be used to assist and support corporates and decision-makers to provide interventions and support mechanisms that will ensure that the mentioned experiences do not remain a reality, thereby increasing representation of this group in leadership positions. It also shows that government interventions of legislature alone do not deal with the issues adequately, thus there has to be a concerted effort from all practitioners in South African corporations.

The identified research components that guided this study were instrumental in comprehensively understanding the direction of existing theory, as well as the new findings. The relevance and significance of each component, as highlighted in Figure 6, have been substantiated through the rich and multifaceted insights gathered from this research.

The components of the conceptual framework served as an analytical lens, enabling a detailed examination of the various factors influencing the experiences of African Black female leaders. These factors include gender, race, class, intersectionality, and lived experience. Each component has played a distinctive yet interconnected role in shaping the professional trajectories of these leaders. The findings not only reaffirm the continued relevance of these research components, but also underscore their interdependence. This interconnectedness underscores the need to adopt an intersectional perspective to fully understand the layered nature of their experiences.

Moving forward, organisations, policymakers, and researchers can draw upon these components to inform strategies that comprehensively address the multifaceted challenges faced by this demographic, fostering environments where African Black female leaders can thrive and contribute meaningfully.

7.2 Contributions of the study

As emphasised in Section 1.4, there is a notable shortage of research that fully acknowledges the crucial intersectional distinctions present for African Black females in South Africa. This study successfully fulfils its objectives by updating and expanding on the intersectional experiences that are unique to African Black females, particularly within the specific context of South Africa (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010).

The study's focus on capturing the essence of the lived experiences of African Black females in professional settings is particularly significant. It probed beyond surface-level analysis, providing an in-depth exploration of the factors that shape their journeys in the corporate landscape. By contextualising these experiences within the established constructs of existing literature, the research contributes to a more refined comprehension of the barriers and opportunities faced by African Black female professionals in the context of South Africa.

One of the key contributions of this study is in highlighting the persistent gap in the representation of African Black females in senior leadership positions. Despite the implementation of affirmative action policies by the government, the research findings offer valuable insights into why this gap persists. This understanding is essential for stakeholders, policymakers, and organisations that aim to address systemic issues and foster a more inclusive and equitable representation of African Black females in leadership roles.

In essence, the study serves as a critical bridge between the lived experiences of African Black females in South Africa and the theoretical frameworks within existing literature. It not only enriches our understanding of the challenges faced by this demographic, but also provides a foundation for informed discussions and targeted interventions aimed at dismantling barriers and fostering genuine inclusivity in senior leadership positions. The findings reveal how this group is challenged and sometimes held back by the interplay of dynamics pointing to intersectionality, class and leadership ideals as reported by Rosette et al. (2016). It can therefore be said that the contribution objectives set out in the problem statement have been met. The study has demonstrated the activities that perpetuate the systems of discrimination for African

Black females and provides insights to enable to crafting of interventions and isolate specific areas of focus for human resource practitioners and business leaders.

Furthermore, this study highlighted how traditional concepts continue to play a role in the systems of oppression, especially for African Black females, given their cultural beliefs and backgrounds. This continues to be an issue for institutions and institutional leaders. However, it is evident that through extensive educational training and socioeconomic backgrounds that have played a role in supporting the agenda of some African Black females, there is a new calibre of educated African Black female professionals who are being subjected to the same oppressive and discriminatory systems that were brought about by traditional concepts such as patriarchy.

This study highlights the importance of shifting the focus from scrutinising women themselves to recognising the persistent institutional systems of oppression and discrimination. The women under investigation in this study were highly educated, had diligently amassed leadership and professional experiences comparable to their male counterparts, and had unequivocally demonstrated their capability to excel in various leadership positions. Therefore, the imperative lies in challenging and dismantling the systemic barriers ingrained in institutions, rather than attributing the underrepresentation of women to perceived deficiencies on their part.

By advocating for a structural and institutional approach, this study aligns with a broader movement calling for systemic change. It emphasises the need to re-evaluate and challenge the existing frameworks and practices within organisations that contribute to the limited representation of women in leadership roles. Instead of perpetuating an individualised narrative, the study encourages a collective responsibility to confront and rectify systemic issues at the organisational level. This was also highlighted by Vinnicombe and Mavin's (2023) study that reviewed women's progress into leadership positions in the UK.

7.3 Study limitations

Research limitations, encompassing flaws or shortcomings arising from aspects such as research design, methodology, timing, and materials, are integral to understanding the scope and context of a research study (Price & Murnan, 2004). In this section, the researcher conscientiously outlines the limitations and shortcomings encountered in the study, while also clarifying potential avenues for future research.

One significant limitation of the study may have stemmed from the chosen methodology. While qualitative research provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of participants, the findings may lack generalisability due to the sample size not presenting all African Black females in all organisations in South Africa and the specificity of the context studied. The study acknowledges that the experiences of African Black female leaders in South Africa may vary across different industries, regions, and organisational structures. Future research could employ a mixed-methods approach or a broader sampling strategy to enhance the generalisability of the findings.

In this study, time constraints were a challenge, especially because the participants held senior roles in their respective organisations and their time was limited. Planning and setting up appointments in advance was critical for obtaining responses. The lengthy lead time to secure interviews meant that the research study took longer than anticipated. The participants' availability or lack thereof may have influenced how they responded, and therefore influenced the direction of their interviews (Harvey, 2011; Stephens, 2007).

Timing is a common limitation with qualitative research as well as the limited interpretation due to personal knowledge and interpretation, this, however, was a process that was allowed and accepted due to the use of hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology allowed the researcher to form part of the study to create deeper meaning and understanding between themselves and the research participants (Koch, 1994; Spence, 2017).

The commitment to reflexivity served as a cornerstone throughout the research process, exemplifying a methodological rigour that enriched the study. The researcher maintained a research diary, a practice recognised for its significance in capturing the researcher's emotions, decisions, and the intricate processes followed during the research journey (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). By documenting emotions, the researcher provided a transparent and introspective lens into the subjective aspects of the study. This reflexive approach acknowledges that the researcher is an integral part of the research process, influencing interpretations and interactions with participants. The research diary became a reflective space, allowing the researcher to explore their own biases, assumptions, and reactions, contributing to the transparency and credibility of the study.

The record of decisions made throughout the research journey adds a layer of accountability to the study. It provides a trail of the choices, considerations, and adaptations made in response to emerging insights. This not only strengthens the internal validity of the study but also offers

valuable insights for future researchers facing similar methodological decisions as highlighted by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007).

Another limitation identified in this study was the small sample size of women who formed part of the LGBTQ community. The dynamics and experiences of women who are part of this community were unraveled during the interview process, but the identification of sexuality did not form part of the interview protocol. There was thus not enough data to expand upon and inform the experiences of this group. This is a future research opportunity.

The other sampling limitation identified in this study was the initial use of convenience sampling, as several African Black female leaders in corporate companies were known to the researcher. The females were asked to recommend a group of Black female leaders who were known to them, which is a combination of purposive and convenience sampling (Andrade, 2021; Palys, 2008). The limitation of this is that the study may have excluded the experiences of other African Black female leaders outside of the researcher's network and in other sectors, such as government organisations.

The term 'Black' in the definition set out in the B-BBEE regulations includes Indian, Coloured and Chinese people. This research focused only on African Black females, however, which was thus a limitation of the study. There is an opportunity to extend and expand this research to females in other population groups as defined by B-BBEE.

Another limitation of this study was the small body of current and existing knowledge in the South African context, given its history of Apartheid and significant racial and ethnic diversity. The research limitations in the context of South Africa were highlighted in the problem statement of the study. By undertaking this research, the aim was to shed light on the intersectional experiences of women in positions of leadership within the country. Intersectionality, a concept developed by feminist scholar Crenshaw (1989), recognises that individuals can experience multiple forms of oppression or privilege simultaneously, resulting from the intersection of various social identities such as gender, race, class, and others.

In the South African context, where the historical legacies of Apartheid and ongoing social inequalities persist, it is crucial to examine how different dimensions of identity intersect and influence women's leadership experiences. By understanding these complex dynamics, the study aimed to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the challenges

and opportunities faced by female leaders from diverse racial backgrounds. This limitation of context-specific research in South Africa is an opportunity for future research.

This study lacks the perspective of Black male leaders, which could have added a crucial layer of depth to the research. Understanding whether the experiences of Black male leaders align with or differ from those of African Black females would have provided a more comprehensive and nuanced view of leadership dynamics within the context of the study. Additionally, gaining insights into the perspectives of African Black male leaders on the experiences of their female counterparts could have facilitated a more holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the broader demographic. While African Black males may be relatively better represented in leadership positions compared to African Black females, it is essential to recognise that the broader African Black population still faces challenges in securing senior and executive roles within corporate structures. The underrepresentation of the African Black population in these leadership positions raises questions about the inclusivity and effectiveness of diversity initiatives. Future research could explore the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black male leaders, as well as investigate the intersections of race and gender within this subgroup.

7.4 Recommendations

7.4.1 Recommendations for practitioners

Leadership studies and practices must keep these research findings in mind and ensure a more inclusive approach when addressing organisational issues for African Black women, as their dynamics and experiences are unique and cannot be matched to those of other population groups. In practice, organisations can run facilitated workshops, engagement sessions with guest speakers, and passive educational programmes to educate groups on the value of having diverse teams and cultural norms within their organisations. This will increase knowledge, build trust and acceptance of one another, and lessen microaggressions.

HR officers need to review their recruitment strategies and performance evaluation processes to ensure that they are not biased. To ensure fairness and objectivity, these evaluations must undergo a thorough review process that effectively eliminates any and all traces of subjectivity. By undertaking this crucial task, companies can significantly enhance the overall effectiveness and accuracy of their evaluation procedures.

Organisations should invest in training their human resource professionals to recognise and mitigate biases in all aspects of the employment lifecycle. Implementing blind recruitment

practices, where candidate information unrelated to qualifications is initially concealed, can be one strategy to minimise unconscious biases during the hiring process. Additionally, human resource departments should actively collaborate with other organisational departments, such as diversity and inclusion teams, to develop and implement policies that foster a more inclusive workplace culture. Transparent reporting on diversity metrics can also hold organisations accountable for their commitment to diversity and equal representation. By empowering human resource professionals to act as advocates for unbiased practices, organisations can take significant strides towards fostering a more inclusive and equitable workplace for African Black females and other underrepresented groups.

The plight of women and family responsibility is critical and often determines whether a female will continue to participate in the workplace or not. Work environments and cultures also need to accommodate a female's role in the home context and allow some flexibility for them to create schedules to balance their workplace and home responsibilities. It is imperative to foster a cultural shift that dismantles gender stereotypes and promotes shared responsibilities within the domestic sphere. Companies and organisations can play a pivotal role in facilitating this shift by implementing family-friendly policies, such as flexible working arrangements and parental leave that support both men and women in balancing their professional and familial responsibilities.

Furthermore, initiatives aimed at challenging traditional gender norms and promoting diversity and inclusion can contribute to reshaping societal expectations. Educational campaigns and advocacy efforts can help dispel stereotypes and foster an environment where individuals are evaluated based on their skills, abilities, and contributions, rather than conforming to gender-based expectations.

Human resources need to create activities and networking opportunities that are inclusive for all professionals but more so for African Black females who tend to be isolated. Efforts to increase collaboration and engagement need to be increased and form part of 'business as usual'. This can be achieved by creating spaces for African Black women to collaborate and engage with colleagues so they are not isolated. Formalised networking as well as driving mentorship relationships in the organisation will increase exposure and connect various levels of the organisation for inclusion, growth and development.

Educational or development initiatives should be put in place with the clear objective of creating a talent pipeline to fill leadership positions. This should be in the form of formal

programmes from leadership academic institutions as well as practical training such as job-shadowing and technical training, which will help promote fairness in the processes of leadership development and promotion. These need to have specific timelines with review periods to protect the participants from false claims or a never-ending process of being developed for roles they will never get to occupy.

South African companies need to embrace and support diversity, inclusion and equity in the workplace. This needs to be entrenched and form part of their organisational culture and not be a 'tick-box' exercise aimed at complying with the Employment Equity Act and the B-BBEE scorecard. The previous dispensation of Apartheid in the country makes systemic racial issues in institutions even more complex and therefore needs buy-in from all stakeholders. Currently, laws that focus on Affirmative Action and Employment Equity are not working adequately for African Black female leaders, as corporate South Africa is still White male-dominated. This makes the representation of African Black females difficult to achieve because their dominance makes them the 'gatekeepers' with selection processes that are biased toward White males.

Boards of directors play a pivotal role in shaping the direction and culture of a company. To foster gender diversity and address biases within a corporate structure, the board should engage in reflective exercises aimed at enhancing their awareness of gender biases, both conscious and unconscious. This reflective process is crucial for creating an inclusive environment and influencing strategic decisions, particularly in CEO, director and senior management appointments. A proactive and reflective approach by the board of directors is instrumental in cultivating gender diversity and mitigating biases within corporate structures. This process not only fosters a more inclusive organisational culture, but also contributes to better decision-making and long-term success.

Promoting gender diversity and inclusivity in organisations requires a fundamental cultural shift, particularly among males in both corporate and household settings. It involves challenging deeply ingrained stereotypes and dismantling the notion that women are primarily suited for household roles rather than leadership positions in boardrooms. This shift necessitates a multidimensional approach at the individual level to understand, confront, and transform the mentality of oppressing women. Challenging gender stereotypes and promoting inclusivity at an individual level, especially among males, is essential for creating organisations where women, including African Black females, thrive in leadership roles. This cultural

transformation requires a concerted effort, education, and a commitment to reshaping not only individual mindsets, but also organisational practices.

Finally, to institute a transformative shift in corporate structures, initiatives must move beyond surface-level interventions and delve into the root causes perpetuating the imbalance, particularly the continued dominance of White males in top-level positions in corporate South Africa. Acknowledging the existence of this inequity is a crucial first step toward implementing comprehensive, sustainable solutions.

Addressing the root causes of the issues highlighted by the African Black females in corporate South Africa demands a comprehensive, strategic approach. Initiatives should transcend gender fixation, focusing on undoing systemic barriers, promoting inclusivity, and leveraging the proven benefits of diverse teams. By doing so, organisations can pave the way for a more equitable and thriving corporate landscape.

It is also important to emphasise that there are global organisations that have achieved remarkable progress in their undertakings to promote inclusion and diversity. These forward-thinking entities have actively strived to ensure fair and equal representation of all groups, while also implementing policies that uphold the principle of equal pay for equal work. It is these very organisations that should serve as role models for the future. By establishing a strong foundation built on inclusivity and fairness, they pave the way for a more harmonious and productive professional environment for all. In a world that is continually evolving and demanding more equitable practices, these organisations stand as beacons of hope, proving that true progress can be achieved when diversity and equal opportunity are embraced and cherished.

7.4.2 Recommendations for future research

Delving into the experiences and perspectives of African Black female leaders who identify as LGBTQIA will add a crucial layer of understanding to the intersectionality discourse. This study can also be applied to exploring the experiences of African Black female leaders in governmental organisations.

Another key area for further research includes delving into the multifaceted realm of implicit biases and stereotypes concerning African Black female leaders. This exploration should not be limited to South Africa, but should encompass the broader African context. Unravelling the

complex dynamics of biases is crucial for dismantling barriers and fostering an environment that is conducive to the success of African Black female leaders across the continent.

Expanding upon the literature gap in leadership studies concerning African Black females, a nuanced exploration of this terrain within the specific context of South Africa holds immense potential for future studies. The historical backdrop of racial segregation in the country, coupled with the intricate tapestry of diverse racial and ethnic groups, adds layers of complexity to the experiences of African Black female leaders. Investigating these complexities is needed for a comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics and for crafting strategies that are attuned to the unique socio-historical landscape of South Africa.

The impact of apartheid, with its systematic oppression and discrimination, has left a haunting mark on the leadership landscape. Analyzing how this historical context has shaped the leadership experiences of African Black leaders offers a critical lens through which to comprehend the challenges they face. The interplay of historical injustices, cultural nuances, and evolving societal expectations poses a good opportunity for future research.

This study can also be applied to females from other ethnic population groups within South Africa. By examining the narratives of Coloured, Chinese, Indian, and foreign African Black females who have chosen South Africa as their professional location, the research can uncover a variety of diverse perspectives that contribute to the broader conversation on leadership and simultaneity of race and gender in their respective processes of identity.

The application of the Anglo-American theories on female leadership experiences which predominantly address White women leaders can be explored in the South African context. The diverse cultures of the White population in South Africa are a great opportunity for research on the experiences of White females in corporate South Africa, which could establish if the dynamics explored in existing theories are relevant for all cultural groups.

Further to the above and beyond the current study on the lived experiences of African Black female leaders in corporate South Africa, several potential avenues for future research can be explored:

Career Progression: Conduct longitudinal studies to track the career progression of African Black female leaders over time, assessing how their experiences and challenges evolve.

Impact of Leadership Programmes: Study the long-term impact of leadership development programmes and mentorship initiatives on the career trajectories of African Black female leaders.

Identity Formation: Study the process of identity formation and its influence on leadership style and effectiveness among African Black female leaders.

Stress Management: Investigate the coping strategies and resilience mechanisms employed by African Black female leaders to manage stress and maintain work-life balance.

Support Systems: Explore the role of support systems such as family, community, and professional networks in the success and well-being of African Black female leaders.

Inclusive Practices: Examine the impact of organisational culture and diversity initiatives on the career advancement and job satisfaction of African Black female leaders.

Leadership Styles: Study the influence of different leadership styles and organisational cultures on the effectiveness and experiences of African Black female leaders.

Policy Impact: Assess the impact of national and organisational policies aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion on the representation and experiences of African Black female leaders.

Advocacy Efforts: Explore the role of advocacy groups and movements in supporting and advancing the careers of African Black female leaders.

Finally, to gain a deeper understanding of the influences of cultural and religious beliefs on the working experiences of African Black females, further research can be conducted in several key areas:

7.4.2.1 Intersectionality

Exploring the complex intersections between cultural, religious, and gender identities can provide valuable insights into how African Black females navigate their professional lives. By investigating the multiple dimensions of these identities, researchers can uncover the unique challenges and opportunities encountered by this specific group.

7.4.2.2 Workplace discrimination based on cultural beliefs and religion

Investigating the prevalence and nature of workplace discrimination faced by African Black females as a result of their cultural and religious beliefs could help to identify discriminatory

practices, create awareness, and contribute to the development of effective strategies for promoting equality and inclusion in the workplace.

7.4.2.3 Leadership and career advancement

Examining the role of cultural and religious beliefs in shaping or blocking leadership opportunities and career advancement for African Black females.

7.4.2.4 Work-life balance

Investigating the influence of cultural and religious values on work-life balance can help identify potential conflicts and tensions experienced by African Black females. By understanding how these factors interplay, organisations can develop policies and practices that support work-life integration and promote employee well-being.

By conducting further research in these areas, a more comprehensive understanding of the impacts of cultural and religious beliefs on the working experiences of African Black females can be gained. This knowledge can inform the development of evidence-based interventions, policies, and strategies that promote equality, diversity, and inclusion in the workplace, creating environments where all individuals can thrive and realise their fullest potential.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Ethics Clearance Letters



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2.26 Leslie Commerce Building, Upper Campus
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 4375/ 5748 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 4369
E-mail: jacques.rousseau@uct.ac.za
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@Commerce UCT UCT Commerce Faculty Office

10/02/2020

Siphiwe Wendy Simelane
Graduate School of Business
University of Cape Town
REF: REC 2020/02/013

The Experiences of Black Female Leaders in Corporate South Africa

We are pleased to inform you that your ethics application has been approved. Unless otherwise specified this ethical clearance is valid until 28 February 2021 .

Your clearance may be renewed upon application.

Please be aware that you need to notify the Ethics Committee immediately should any aspect of your study regarding the engagement with participants as approved in this application, change. This may include aspects such as changes to the research design, questionnaires, or choice of participants.

The ongoing ethical conduct throughout the duration of the study remains the responsibility of the principal investigator.

We wish you well for your research.

2020.02.10
17:23:53 +02'00'

Jacques Rousseau
Commerce Research Ethics Chair
University of Cape Town
Commerce Faculty Office
Room 2.26 | Leslie Commerce Building

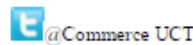
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@Commerce UCT



UCT Commerce Faculty Office

07 03 2021

Siphiwe Wendy Simelane
Graduate School of Business
University of Cape Town
REF: REC 2021/03/006

The Experiences of Black Female Leaders in Corporate South Africa

We are pleased to inform you that your ethics application has been approved. Unless otherwise specified this ethical clearance is valid until 31-Mar-2022 .

Your clearance may be renewed upon application.

Please be aware that you need to notify the Ethics Committee immediately should any aspect of your study regarding the engagement with participants as approved in this application, change. This may include aspects such as changes to the research design, questionnaires, or choice of participants.

The ongoing ethical conduct throughout the duration of the study remains the responsibility of the principal investigator,

We wish you well for your research.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JRousseau'.

2021.03.07
15:50:37 +02'00'

Jacques Rousseau
Commerce Research Ethics Chair
University of Cape Town
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APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Agreement Form



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
FACULTY OF COMMERCE
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INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT

This agreement serves to confirm that the research participant mentioned below gave her consent to participate in a qualitative process study regarding *The Experiences of Black Female Leaders in Corporate South Africa*. The research participant agrees to provide the researcher with her experiences and views of the area of research to the best of her ability.

The undersigned participant understands the purpose and nature of the study and understands that her participation is voluntary and that she may stop the interview/compiling solicited essays/memoranda, at any time. The participant further grants permission for the data collected to be used in fulfilment of part of the requirements for the degree PhD in Business Administration including an assignment, an article to be published in an academic journal as well as any future publication(s) or dissemination of results.

The data collected will be used for research purposes only, the researcher(s) undertakes neither to disclose the identity of any of the participants, nor the origin of any of the statements made by any of them. However, the undersigned participant understands that in terms of the ideals of the study's methodology that the researcher is obliged to make use of verbatim statements from the transcribe taped interviews and/or excerpts from solicited and participant-approved essays and/or any other visual (e.g. photographs) in order to illustrate the world of the research participants and their perspectives in the research report.

The participant grants permission for the audio recording and that the researcher may make notes of her/ views and experiences.

The participant undertakes to give a true representation of her/ perspective and/or her/his experiences.

Consent is given according to the stipulations above and permission is herewith granted to Siphwe Wendy Simelane student number SMLSIP006 and Prof Kurt April (supervisor of the study) to utilise the data according to the stipulations above.

I, the undersigned participant, agree to meet at mutually agreeable times and duration(s) or other means of communication, e.g. by e-mail, as reasonably necessary to enable the researcher Siphwe Wendy Simelane to gain a thorough understanding of the system researched. I further acknowledge that I received a copy of this agreement and that I may contact any one of the under mentioned if I have any subsequent queries.

Signatures of
Research participant: _____

Researcher: _____

Tel of data collector: 082 569 9588
Email of data collector: siphwewendy@gmail.com

APPENDIX C: Interview Guide



The Experiences of African Black Female Leaders in Corporate South Africa

Interview Guide

The interview guide will include the following:

1. Participant's demographic information
2. Age
3. Number of children
4. Educational level
5. Socio-economic status
6. High school attended
7. University attended
8. Town of birth
9. Current place of residence
10. Racial group
11. Total number of years of working experience and number of years in current position
12. Management level currently occupied

Given that the main research question is what are the lived experiences of Black female leaders in corporate South Africa? The sub-questions explored were

13. How did you get to work in your current organisation?
14. How have you experienced being a Black female leader in the organisations you worked in?
15. How have your experiences shaped or informed your understanding of leadership?
16. How would you describe who you really are – your identity/all aspects of it?

17. What has influenced your most important career decisions?
18. Do you feel that you have the power to completely make all of your workplace decisions, or are you undermined at times? Please give examples.
19. Has your gender ever played a role in holding you back in your career? Please explain.
20. In which ways has your background played a role in your leadership style and the way in which you engage your colleagues and subordinates?
21. Do you feel that being Black has played, or still plays, a role in your legitimacy as a leader?
22. How do you think you are viewed in relation to male leaders of similar position?
23. What would you say your biggest challenges are as a leader?
24. Do you feel that your socio-economic background has played, or still plays a role, in your legitimacy as a leader?
25. How do your experiences make you feel about being in corporate South Africa?
26. To what do you ascribe your experiences?
27. How would you describe an ideal leadership experience for women leaders?