

**Women in Senior Leadership Positions: Higher Education in eSwatini**

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## Introduction

Issues of inequality within the workplace remain an ongoing conversation due to the slow advancement of women in senior leadership positions, with more research and literature emerging on the topic (see for example Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Poltera, 2019). Workplace inequality is a global phenomenon that does not only exist in the African context, but widely in the Western contexts as well (Kemp, 2020), with varying implications for women in each of these contexts. Globally, women only take up around thirty seven percent (37%) of leadership positions, and are still primarily employed in low-status positions (Ryan, 2022). This study explored the experiences of women in senior leadership positions in higher education institutions and their role in and impact on policy making. The study was located in the Kingdom of eSwatini (formerly known as Swaziland), a small landlocked Southern African country, in the Sub-Saharan Region, which borders Mozambique and South Africa. With the inequalities that exist in eSwatini, women are most affected by the political, economic, and socio-cultural issues which perpetuate their marginalization and discrimination (Macdonald, 2016). Macdonald (2016) addresses the socio-cultural and economic issues in eSwatini that include, women's lack of legal rights to administer their own assets, as well as fewer opportunities of employment that women have access to. Schwidrowski et al. (2021) highlights how policymakers in the Sub-Saharan African region have emphasized the importance of gender equality towards sustainable development. Yet the Sub-Saharan African region, including eSwatini, continue to still experience large gender gaps. eSwatini remains one of the countries within the region that still grapples with high levels of inequality. Additionally, Schwidrowski et al. (2021) explain that eSwatini ranks in the bottom quarter of countries globally in relation to inequality amongst men and women. Women's labour force participation as well as access to resources and economic opportunities are comparatively lower than that of their male counterparts in eSwatini (Schwidrowski et al., 2021). Kamalizeni et al. (2021) address the under-representation of women in leadership positions in the Sub-Saharan African region and unpack the phenomenon of large organisations mainly being led by men, as well as the several hurdles of infrastructural collapse which women face in public or state-owned enterprises. eSwatini is characterized by a pervasive and continued lack of female representation and decision-making in both public and private sectors (Macdonald, 2016). Macdonald (2016) further outlines how the eSwatini constitution (2005) article 59(5) has made various strides to

ensure women's representation and equal economic participation. Various clauses noted in the constitution cite women's representation in the public enterprise and aim to promote equality, such as the clause that the house of the assembly in eSwatini should consist of at least 50% female representation, however, only 6% of the 65 members were female when the survey was conducted by the Department of Gender and Family issues in 2014 (Constitution 2005, Article 94, p.86). Macdonald (2016) further acknowledges that eSwatini is a deeply patriarchal society which produces inequitable societal norms for women, resulting in clashes between the customary laws and the constitution. Zulu (2019) speaks to the conflict experienced by women which arose as a consequence of the dual legal system of Roman Dutch common law and eSwatini customary law. Although eSwatini is said to have signed the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2018), government has taken no steps to implement the charter, leaving the under-representation of women in leadership positions largely unaddressed (Zulu, 2019). In highlighting women's under representation in eSwatini, Zulu's (2019) article highlights the multiple issues women experience, including challenges with cultural norms and sexual violence which leads to women experiencing high rates of HIV infection, married women not having rights without their husband's consent, and women's low wages resulting in men having control over household and family resources. Carbajal (2018) foregrounds the institutionalization of inequitable gender norms, stating these as a common factor leading to women's biased treatment in the workplace. He further discusses the obstacles that women must overcome in order to obtain leadership positions. Such obstacles include the lack of mentorship opportunities for women and the institutions' preference for leadership styles based on masculine characteristics (Carbajal, 2018).

Kamalizeni et al. (2021) state that although studies on women's leadership exist globally, a paucity of literature exists within the Sub-Saharan African region, and even more so in eSwatini where gendered inequality remains high. The high levels of gender inequality in the workplace eSwatini and the paucity of literature on this phenomenon within this context, highlight a need for a study that seeks to understand the experiences of women in senior leadership positions specifically in higher education institutions and the role they play in policy making within this context.

Data for the study was collected in eSwatini, focusing on accredited higher learning institutions. This thesis focused on the in-depth experiences of women in senior leadership positions, examining their experiences within these positions and how they navigate and challenge

workplace inequality, as well as their role in and contribution to policy making in these institutions. This study adopted an intersectional feminist approach as a lens through which it examined women's experiences of being in leadership positions, in higher education institutions in eSwatini.

### **Literature Review**

Kamalizeni (2019) notes that women's under-representation in the workplace and in senior leadership positions is a universal phenomenon, though more pronounced in the Sub-Saharan African region as compared to the Western region. Women's experiences of inequality are subject to various contexts, with varying factors that make it more pronounced and severe in different contexts globally. According to the 2019 State of Women in SADC Barometer Report, the Southern Africa Gender and Development report ranked South Africa at the top of the list with regards to women's political participation in the SADAC region (Nyamweda & Morna, 2019). The House of Assembly saw women's participation at 46% in provincial legislatures and at 50% in cabinet during the May 2019 elections. South Africa reached 50/50 representation in cabinet following the May 2019 elections which was a first in Southern Africa (Nyamweda & Morna, 2019, p.3).

Myataza (2020) notes how several women leaders are taking up rank in public spaces and institutions that were previously held by men. Suggesting that Africa does not have a deficit of women leaders, but rather, women are being excluded from these positions through various structural barriers. The author further argues that there is a need for the structures that silence women to be removed in order to bring about efficient changes. Studies on women's experiences of such structures in the Sub-Saharan African region are important, as stated by Poltera (2019), who highlights the significance of the theoretical interest in women's experiences of inequality in the workplace and the importance of analyzing women's experiences of being in senior leadership positions.

### **Women leadership in the Sub-Saharan African Region**

According to Ketchiwou and van der Walt (2023), women's employment has increased significantly despite varying social obstacles, and it is estimated that 49.64 percent (49.64%) of South Africa's workforce is female, but Ketchiwou and van der Walt (2023) note that fewer women

than men occupy influential positions. Men continue to hold the majority of high-ranking academic positions in South African higher education institutions (Khumalo & Ndlovu, 2024). Research conducted within the context of higher education institutions refers to the inequalities that are faced by women in advancing to senior positions (Peterson, 2019). Peterson (2019) further explains that senior leadership positions in universities are customarily occupied by men, which reflects the ongoing power relations and masculine leadership models within higher education environments. Peterson's (2019) article, which is based on women in Swedish higher education environments, seems to resonate and is relevant within the African context as one can see the same trends replicating themselves in relation to the low representation of women in leadership positions in academic institutions within the Sub-Saharan African region. Macupe (2020) noted that South Africa had only four women Vice-chancellors out of all 26 universities in the country in 2020, which reflects trends that are visible within the broader region. Similarly, a keynote address made by Minister Naledi Pandor (2023) revealed that currently in South Africa, fifteen percent (15%) of the twenty-six (26) Vice-chancellors are women and out of thirty (30) Deputy Vice-chancellors only twelve (12) are women.

Scholars conducting research on women in higher education in the Sub-Saharan African region highlight the need for ongoing research as various studies seem to yield different findings. Seale et al. (2021) expresses the challenges of transformation that women grapple with as they try to advance to senior positions in the workplace. Their findings allude to the underlying inequitable gender relations, citing patriarchy and cultural norms as the biggest challenge against women's advancement. Another study conducted by Mwagiru (2020) focuses on business and higher education, setting its focus on understanding the challenges that African women experience as they try to advance to senior positions in South Africa and Kenya. His findings reveal the interplay of gender inequality, culture, hierarchal structures and exclusive grouping within organizations. A study conducted by Kele and Pietersen (2015) addresses the transformation of higher education environments through the implementation of policies that favor women and their advancement. The study points out the slow rate at which transformation has taken shape for women in higher education who want to advance to senior positions, and especially leadership. Guramatunhu-Mudiwa (2010) also highlight the issue of gender inequality in senior leadership positions at higher education institutions in the Sub-Saharan African region, as is observed in various employment industries eSwatini (Macdonald, 2016; Zulu, 2019). Very few studies have been conducted

specifically on women in higher education institutions eSwatini, limiting our understanding of the challenges faced by women in academia within this context and the factors that shape women's experiences, some of which are discussed in the following section.

### **Women, Patriarchy, and Culture**

Social norms regarding the various roles that men and women ought to assume have been shaped by gender stereotypes. Gender discrimination in the workplace typically has roots in specific historical periods and social circumstances, such as social roles emphasized by patriarchy (Kameshwara & Shukla, 2017). Beyer et al. (2023) suggest that once institutions are aware of the preconceptions of gender roles and norms which contribute to gender stereotypes, they will be better equipped to deal with stereotyping and discrimination. Cundiff and Vescio (2016) also make suggestions of gender stereotyping, stating that gender stereotypes offer convincing justifications for the under-representation of women and the over-representation of males in positions of leadership. Gender stereotypes typically assume women are less self-assured, overly sentimental, less ambitious, and less equipped to handle high-pressure roles in support of family duties (Cundiff and Vescio 2016). According to Watterston and Ehrich (2023), women leaders' perceptions of themselves and how others receive them are often influenced by male leadership through internalized sexism, comparison to male leaders and adoption of traditionally masculine leadership styles, leading to self-doubt, imposter syndrome and feelings of inauthenticity. The authors further state one of the obstacles that women encounter in the workplace as gender stereotyping, which include being confined to gender specific roles that are appropriate for women's cultural roles, such as being a care taker in the home (Watterston and Ehrich, 2023). Showunmi (2021) states that although social roles have been reshaped, women still face several formal and informal pressures from family and society, the political sphere, social norms and 'professional pressure groups' where male dominance is a powerful image. The SADAC protocol on gender and development was revised and signed by all SADAC representative members in 2016 and addresses gender inequality and women's constitutional rights. This article bases its principles on implementing policies which ensure that women's participation increases in all spheres in the workplace, so as to closely match that of their male counterparts. Additionally, their objectives focus on women's empowerment and the elimination of women's discrimination. Although this treaty was signed, and in March 2018 the Traditional Courts Bill in South Africa was approved by the National

Assembly to ensure women's equal participation in the workplace, Nyamweda and Morna (2019) argue that the principles and objectives on women's empowerment have not yet evolved following these developments.

Women's voices are being silenced, thereby shifting power in favor of male household heads and traditional leaders. The consideration around traditional leadership in the Sub-Saharan African region is seen to have an impact on single women who are perceived by traditional leaders as having lower societal standing. Having observed previous research, Myataza (2020) acknowledges that much of the information that exists points towards patriarchy being prominent in the African continent. Furthermore, Poltera (2019) alludes to patriarchy as the most significant barrier to women, whether they are in decision making positions or not. The effects of patriarchy therefore result in women having to work harder than men in order to maintain their positions or to advance to senior positions (Phakeng, 2015). Research points to women being given more work and yet still being more productive than men in the workplace (Ellemers, 2014). According to an article by the World Economic Forum (WEF), women are said to work 10% harder than men in the workplace, and even though they are given more work than men, women are reported to still complete it in record time (Berman, 2018).

The patriarchal norms which characterize the Sub-Saharan African region dictate that family roles and responsibilities are placed largely on women (Carbajal, 2018). Carbajal (2018) argues that placing the child rearing and household responsibilities solely on women often slows down their professional advancement. The pressure exerted by cultural norms puts pressure on women to place family over career advancement. Purcell (2011) highlights the persistence of gender roles that insist on women's participation in the home, limiting their ability to participate in the workplace. The authors go on to mention that gendered roles position men as front-runners in the workspace, while many women experience challenges and barriers towards entering and advancing in the workplace. Ziman (2013) suggests that it is still more prevalent for women to stay at home, while men assume the role of being the provider who goes out to 'work'.

Though workplace inequality remains pervasive, it is also important to take note of the fact that women are increasingly taking up spaces in the workplace, though not enough to 'tip' the scales just yet. Ahmed (2008) recognizes the inter-role conflict that women experience, as they try satisfying all their roles at home and at work. It is also worth noting that conflict between women's family obligations and their professional jobs brings about challenges in their advancement in the

workspace (Padavic, Ely & Reid, 2019). The concept of family-work conflict is further acknowledged by Ajayi et al. (2020), who highlights the demands for women to spend time with the family, to care for children or elders, and to maintain the home, while having to fulfil the requirements of paid work. Ziman (2013) argues that although women deal with family-work conflict, they still bring about greater profitability and effective leadership styles into their workspaces. This places the burden on women to excel in both areas, within the home and at work, while men are not challenged to participate within their homes.

The key challenge for women leaders is patriarchy (Seale et al., 2021). According to some scholars, gender inequality is deeply ingrained in institutional and cultural frameworks, particularly in patriarchal societies (Khan et al., 2024). According to Watterson and Ehrich (2023), "normative gatekeeping" refers to the process by which the male leadership model has become the accepted norm for leadership behaviors. Consequently, the word "leader" was linked to masculine characteristics and patriarchy. According to Watterson and Ehrich (2023) normative gatekeeping is what ultimately determines how institutions will view women within their walls.

Seale et al. (2021) propose the idea that in addition to challenging patriarchal systems and normative gate keeping, women should also look for avenues of shifting the discourse and culture towards pluralistic leadership that values and incorporates diverse perspectives to achieve a common goal. Although women are challenged to shift the discourse, it becomes difficult to do so if all forms of power remain with men. According to Dlamini and Adams (2014), research conducted on the effects of patriarchy, highlight how women in institutions face male dominance, disempowerment, and disdain against other women. These authors suggest that patriarchy hinders women's ability to advance in life and prevents them from receiving promotions they are entitled to, further implying that the prevalent patriarchal setting affects their emotional and intellectual health in addition to their academic performance. O'Neil and Domingo (2015) state that although gender inequalities remain a challenge, globally, women have more access to positions of authority now than they did 30 years ago. In eSwatini, Kunene (2017) acknowledges the fundamental development objectives of women empowerment programmes which seek to eradicate gender inequality, but states that the paucity of research on women's experiences of such empowerment programmes in eSwatini limits our understanding of the impact of such developmental efforts. Patriarchy and cultural norms seem to adversely affect women's advancement to senior positions.

Concurrently, there seems to be a struggle with male counterparts who still want to maintain power and refuse to support women who are currently in senior positions (Mankayi & Chenteni, 2021).

Ryan (2022) suggests initiatives such as promoting women into under-represented professions and roles, supporting women's career paths, and keeping women in the workforce are all part of the workplace gender equality movement. Ryan (2022) further comments that it's important to acknowledge that unconscious bias accounts for a large portion of gender discrimination, though not all of it. When individuals acknowledge discrimination, it becomes a crucial first step in combating it (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). Studies on implicit prejudice and implicit association are the most frequently referenced to support unconscious bias training. Unconscious bias training may be effective in increasing awareness, but it is less successful in changing behavior or promoting gender equality (Ryan, 2022). The article in the UN Women (2024) titled 'Five things to accelerate women's economic empowerment' addresses other initiatives aimed at supporting women in leadership positions. This includes 'security' as one of the measures to assist women and empower them in their positions. The article in the UN Women identifies insecurity, in whatever form, keeps women from realizing their rights and potential, this impedes their economic empowerment. The article refers to crucially combatting social conventions that regard women as less valuable than males as economic players and to bring together a variety of stakeholders, including those in the business sector. The importance of understanding the power struggles women experience in a patriarchal society is often noted in literature and these experiences should be further explored within varying workplace contexts such as academia, as this study seeks to do.

### **Women leadership and the COVID-19 pandemic**

In the article "SADAC Towards a Common Future" the secretary of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Dr Tax talks about how the pandemic has affected women more than men (Tax, 2015). She continues to highlight the challenges faced by women in the informal sector due to the pandemic (Tax, 2015). The McKinsely's report on COVID-19's impact on women's employment reveals that the pandemic has seen more women 'burn out' than men, and that women are more likely to leave the workforce due to the demands of being a mother and a leader. They also noted that while all women have experienced some form of discrimination, three major groups have been impacted the most, these are working mothers, women in senior

positions, and Black women (Jablonska, 2021). Lui, et al. (2021) support the McKinsely report and place emphasis on how women have been affected by the pandemic and are said to face further barriers in their advancement in light of the pandemic.

The gender inequalities that existed prior to the pandemic increased significantly during the pandemic, with more women losing their jobs, having to spend more time on household responsibilities and childcare than men (Kramer, 2021). Tizora (2021) focuses on the pandemic's impact on women-led enterprises in eSwatini and the data shows that women took on more roles at home than at work. She further cites gender stereotypes as one of the obstacles women encounter, specifically the perception of women as incapable of running enterprises, which impacts their access to social networks and support. According to an article published in the *Journal of Women in Health and Social Services*, women's representation in the healthcare and social sector is 70% globally, and on average, women do three times as much unpaid work as men (Maula, 2021). In eSwatini, the pandemic highlighted the leadership capacities of women who were given the opportunity to lead and innovate in addressing the various challenges facing the country. Women led communities and families through the pandemic by turning challenges in their communities into opportunities (Ndongo-Seh, 2021), showing women's strength in leadership. The author states how the pandemic witnessed brave leadership from women who took to the forefront in dealing with the crisis. Ndongo-Seh (2021) further notes how the pandemic highlighted various issues which mostly affected women, such as the physical and psychological abuse perpetrated against women. The pandemic resulted in an increase in cases of physical violence and sexual abuse perpetrated against women and girls who were at home due to the lockdown restrictions (Ndongo-Seh, 2021). According to Ndongo-Seh (2021), this violence resulted in 87 out of every 1000 girls dropping out of school due to pregnancy, impacting girls' educational advancement, and consequently, widening the inequality gap in the workplace (Ndongo-Seh, 2021). The school dropout rate for girls presents a major challenge for women's advancement and representation in the workplace, limiting the number of women who can enter and become leaders in varying organisations including academic institutions (Ndongo-Seh, 2021).

### **Women advancement and mentorship**

Family duties, marriage, and motherhood are among the non-workplace elements that are cited as hindering women's skill advancement and professional progress, according to Ketchiwou

and van der Walt (2023). In addition to being optimistic and self-assured, Ketchiwou and van der Walt (2023) suggest that women should communicate their career aspirations to their managers in order to advance in their positions. However, due to gender bias, articulating career goals may not always result in the expected outcomes. Carbajal (2018) argues that mentorship is a critical tool that women need to take advantage of in order to achieve their goals and aspirations. He further states that if women do not take advantage of it, they will be stuck with a brick ceiling and advancement will happen at a slow pace. Although mentoring alone is not the reason why Black women are under-represented, it is argued that mentorship is essential for academics' career growth and network building (Khumalo & Ndlovu, 2024). According to Washington (2010), the lack of mentoring opportunities makes it hard for women to gain promotion in the workplace. Various studies highlight the role of mentorship in creating opportunities for women to advance in the workplace. For example, a study conducted in South Africa by Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) advocate for the recognition of mentorship as a development strategy and affirmative action tool towards women's advancement. Within their study, they acknowledge the positive outcomes of mentorship towards women's advancement but recognize the paucity of mentors especially in the public sector. Similarly, Cross et al. (2019) allude to the inadequate mentorship provided to woman in academia as a result of the continuous lack of female representation in senior positions. Within their study, they note career development, personal development, academic craftsmanship (proficiency in academic teaching), psychosocial support and job satisfaction (Cross et al., 2019) as benefits of mentoring, and the unavailability of mentors and the various factors that can make it difficult to find one as barriers to mentorship. Other barriers include the lack of time and resources that are needed to mentor (Cross et al., 2019).

The absence of mentorship in the Sub-Saharan African region is recognized by Quincy (2018) who further identifies the social components in African culture which form a barrier towards African women and efficient mentorship. He argues that the expectations of reciprocity from male and female mentors are both distorted and unrealistic. The expectation of exchange of social benefits are recognized from males who mentor women, while women who mentor other women are noted to yield an environment of competition both socially and professionally (Quincy, 2018). The lack of opportunities for women in the workplace encourages competition, making the mentorship relationship among women difficult to establish and maintain. The lack of leadership opportunities for women within organizations is noted as the cause of women mentors viewing

their mentees as a challenge (Quincy, 2018). The need to improve institutional capacity for the development of mentoring systems for women in higher education in the Sub-Saharan African region is noted by Somefun and Adebayo (2020). Quincy (2018) suggests that more work needs to be done to promote mentorship in African institutions, and further argues that the paucity of mentorship programs in higher education may hinder development within the Sub-Saharan African region. The problem of mentoring, especially for Black women, has not been significantly resolved despite a number of policies and initiatives designed to address it (Khumalo & Ndlovu 2024). However, Khumalo and Ndlovu (2024) assert that there is a sufficient amount of South African literature on mentoring female academics as a means of integrating South African scholars into their respective areas. The idea of using mentorship to improve the academic environment for Black African women researchers has not received much attention (Khumalo and Ndlovu, 2024). Khumalo and Ndlovu (2024) propose that professional networks and mentoring be utilized to investigate and dismantle the prevailing culture in South African HEIs that has excluded women in academics, especially Black Women, rather than just being initiatives to support the advancement of black women in academia. Despite the challenges in mentoring, a study by Owusu-Ageman (2022) in a South African university found that professional staff at South African universities receive hands-on training, become accustomed to their new roles, create social networks, and learn about the university culture when they receive mentorship. According to Hill et al. (2022), the advantages from an institutional standpoint ultimately result in beneficial mentorship relationships that lead to high levels of engagement and work satisfaction, interprofessional faculty retention, increased trust in the institution's dedication to faculty, successful promotion or career development, and increased grant acquisition rates.

### **Race, class and gender as factors shaping women's leadership**

Various dimensions of inequality exist for Black Women. Azmitha (2021) and Mansfield (2021) discuss that gender, race, social class, and sexuality intersect to shape women's experiences of social oppressions. Intersectionality examines how gender, racism, and other identity issues interact, arguing that race, class, and gender are not separate categories of experience but rather are experienced together (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Shung-King et al. (2018) and Stockfelt (2018) cite Black women as the minority group who are impacted the most by social inequalities and are the most underrepresented within the workplace. Despite the fact that sexism affects all women,

Black African women's experiences in academia are far worse than those of women of other races due to discrimination and exclusion (Khumalo & Ndlovu, 2024). Ncube (2018) argues that there are more white women represented in senior leadership positions than there are Black women in South Africa, and further cites both race and gender as predictors of career progression in many organizations.

The Sub-Saharan African region still sees a large gender gap in career advancement, with the focus being on Black women who are noticeably at the bottom of the socio-economical hierarchy (Phakeng, 2015). Professor Phakeng's (2015) article titled '*Leadership: The invisibility of African women and the masculinity of power*' argues that Black women have suffered a 'triple oppression': first, as disadvantaged and disregarded in class terms; secondly as black in a racialized society that privileges the white minority; and thirdly as women in patriarchal African cultures. Professor Phakeng (2015) makes reference to workplace inequalities, stating that women in South Africa are generally employed in low-skilled positions in the workplace, despite their educational gains. Studies further conducted in South Africa by Schofield and Goodwin (2005) found that power and authority was notably preserved for senior level men. While patriarchy seems to contribute to women's underrepresentation in the workplace, authors Morgan (2020) and Di Stasio and Larsen (2020) address race as another factor that hinders women's advancement to senior leadership positions. Di Stasio and Larsen (2020) highlight that Black women are not only more disadvantaged than white women, but also Black men. Black women are said to face various forms of microaggressions (othering) as reported in the Mckinsely article cited earlier, which reports that White women are less likely than Black women to go through such forms of "othering" and be disrespected in the workplace (Burns et al, 2021).

A study by Dlamini (2020) explores race, politics and the constitution leading to eSwatini's independence. The study alludes to the relationship King Sobhuza 11 (previous ruling king) had with white people from South Africa, this relationship granted preference and privileges to whites than eSwatini's minority population, Black women. With time, King Sobhuza 11 abandoned the pro-white policies to ensure support of the black electorate (Dlamini, 2020). Malcolm et al.'s (2009) article titled 'Education and internalized racism in socio-political context: Zimbabwe and Swaziland' addresses negative stereotyping towards the minority group, Black people. The study challenges racism in the Zimbabwean and Swazi contexts. Although they highlight racism to be imbedded in both societies, eSwatini and Zimbabwe's construction of racism is different (Malcolm

et al. 2009). Malcolm et al.'s (2009) understanding of race in eSwatini lies in context with the history of colonialism, which he argues minimally affected eSwatini. They further state that eSwatini does not have racial or tribal tensions due to the fewer number of people who do not claim their origin in eSwatini. The small number of white people residing in eSwatini consist mainly of self-sufficient business owners who compete for jobs with Black people (Malcolm et al., 2009), they do recognize that some white people in eSwatini do occupy senior leadership positions in the capital-intensive industries and therefore compete with Black people. Dlamini (2020) however highlights how race in eSwatini is important but underexplored.

The issues surrounding the social class inequalities and advancement in the workplace in eSwatini are highlighted through the disparities of women's education compared to that of men (Doran, 2017). Doran's (2017) article based in eSwatini notes that 15% of Swazi women enroll in school in comparison to 45% of Swazi men. The author highlights the dire state of the country which sees two-thirds of the population living in poverty which, alongside gender insensitivity, HIV/AIDS, and early pregnancy, is noted as one of the main barriers to women's progression in the workplace. These barriers lead to Swazi women dropping out of school and prevent them from continuing with their career paths (Doran, 2017). Consequently, the high dropout rate for women in schools weakens skills development, lowering their chances of entering higher education institutions, and thus impacting women's representation in senior leadership positions.

### **Aim and objectives**

The aim of this study was to explore and understand the experiences of women in senior leadership positions in higher education institutions and their roles and contribution to policy-making within these institutions, eSwatini. The objectives of the study were as follows:

- To understand the challenges and barriers that women in senior leadership positions in higher education experience.
- To examine women senior leaders' contribution towards policy-making in the workplace
- To explore women's access to mentorship programmes and relationships, and the extent to which such programmes support women's advancement in the workplace.
- To examine the support systems available for women in senior leadership positions (from family and the institution)

In line with the above-stated aim and objectives, the study sought to ask the following main questions:

- What are women's experiences of being in senior leadership positions in academia eSwatini?
- What challenges and barriers do women experience in senior leadership positions in academic institutions eSwatini?
- To what extent do women in senior leadership positions in these academic institutions contribute to policy-making in the workplace?
- What support systems or developmental programmes (e.g. mentorship) are made available to women in senior leadership positions?

## **Rationale**

Learning about the experiences of women who are in senior leadership positions in higher education is crucial, more especially so in eSwatini where there has been a lack of studies that document the in-depth stories and experiences of women in these positions. Kamalizeni et al. (2021) reflect on the limited amount of data collected on women in Sub-Saharan Africa more broadly. Data collected from Kamalizeni et al. (2021) also highlights the importance of addressing the under-representation of women in senior positions in higher education, eSwatini. Although the primary focus of Kamalizeni et al.'s (2021) study is based on the inequalities that women experience, their study also includes male participants rather than an in-depth focus on women's experiences exclusively. The discussion paper series initiated by the IZA Institute of Labor Economics which has discussions on eSwatini's gender gaps are focused on the pay gap between men and women in the labor market. This discussion paper argues that the pay gap is only one of the many factors that affect women in the workplace (Schwidrowski et al., 2021). This article sets its focus on the gender pay gap, and not so much women's lived experiences of inequality. Schwidrowski et al. (2021) study takes on a quantitative approach, using statistical procedures for analysis, with no exploration of women's detailed narratives. Poltera (2019) argues that women's experiences should be explored theoretically, with the aim of not only contributing to literature, but also influencing policy and providing evidence that supports calls for equitable relations in the workplace. I am a Black woman and I endeavor to add value in the academic space concerning

women's underrepresentation in senior leadership positions, through this qualitative project that centers women's experiences. A study such as this has the potential to inform high level decision-making structures within academia eSwatini, highlighting the gender disparities within this space and the ways in which such disparities impact women and limit their participation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on intersectional feminism as a lens through which the various barriers affecting women's equal participation and experiences in senior leadership positions are explored. The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, a law professor, critical race theory scholar, and civil rights advocate. As a feminist and antiracist theory, the concept was introduced as a direct challenge to the marginalization of Black women (Carbado et al., 2013) to highlight the multiple oppressions they experience. Intersectionality argues that various factors such as race, gender, and sexuality are often linked to social structures that oppress and privilege people (Kelly et al., 2020). Carbado et al. (2013) discuss how scholars and activists have broadened intersectionality to include a range of social issues such as social identities, power dynamics, legal and political systems. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework imbedded in the principle that human experience is mutually shaped by multiple social positions and cannot be sufficiently understood by considering social positions individually (Bauer et al., 2021). Feminism is a theory that works alongside intersectionality as it forms the base of exploring women's inequalities. Feminism advocates for the social, economic and political equality for women (Brunell & Burkett 2022). Feminist theory was initially used to explain women's oppressions globally, although currently the theoretical explanations have taken major shifts (Carlson & Ray, 2011). These shifts as noted by Carlson and Ray (2011), include a move from universalizing to particularizing and contextualizing women's experiences. Another shift noted by the authors include conceptualizing men and women as categories. With the focus on "women" in a category, they move to the exploration of gendered practices (Carlson & Ray, 2011). Therefore, given the importance of exploring women's experiences and how they are shaped by all these factors, intersectional feminism is an important lens through which I will explore the experiences of women within this study. This framework will be best suited as my study focuses on women's experiences, experiences that may differ on the basis of where women are located on the social hierarchies of

class, race, age, marital status, etc. This framework informed not only how I engaged with the data, but also how I approached the actual study and the ways in which I engaged my participants.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

An exploratory qualitative research approach was used to understand the experiences of women in senior leadership positions in higher education institutions eSwatini. The purpose of qualitative research was to allow for the detailed and in-depth exploration of women's experiences in senior leadership positions (Gravetter & Forzano, 2015). An exploratory approach is more useful in contexts where little information exists about a particular phenomenon, which is the case in relation to women's experiences of senior leadership positions in higher education institutions eSwatini. Though exploratory, this study was informed by the phenomenological approach to qualitative research which focuses on understanding human experience and the meanings attached to such experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). As such, this study explores not only what participants experienced, but also the meanings attached to such experiences (Creswell, 2007). This study was informed, more specifically, by hermeneutic phenomenology in its data collection and analysis, and in understanding the data provided by the participants. As Bhar (2019) states, hermeneutic phenomenology is an approach that helps researchers to comprehend the nature and realities of others' lived experiences.

### **Sample**

This study adopted purposive sampling methods to recruit a sample size of 20 participants who have knowledge of and have experienced the phenomenon under study – women in senior leadership positions in higher education institutions in eSwatini. Palinkas et al. (2015) present purposive sampling as a technique used in qualitative research that involves identifying individuals or groups of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest and can reflect on these experiences, rather than to seek secondary views on such experiences. Despite the assumption that there would be a greater proportion of Black women, the sample of all races was included to broaden and allow for the inclusion of all women's experiences. Sampling was continuous and ongoing until a point of saturation was reached within the data set (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014), while

also working towards meeting the proposed number of participants. These sampling methods denote that participants were not randomly selected from the population and were, instead, selected based on their ability to add value to the research study on the condition that they met the requisite inclusion criteria (Gravetter & Forzano, 2015). As a secondary participant recruitment method, I used snowball sampling, mentioned by Valerio et al. (2016), which is used as a chain-referral method, where the initial participants are asked to recruit others to the study. I requested the participants in the study to refer me to any other women in senior leadership positions in higher education who they knew fit the inclusion criteria outlined below. Participants were selected from various institutions in eSwatini. All participants were academics who took on leadership positions. Snowball sampling methods have proven fruitful in accumulating people with similar attributes (Goodman, 1961) and therefore, was utilised in this study as purposive sampling did not yield a sufficient number of participants.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

The individuals who were included as participants in this study are those who met the following inclusion criteria:

- Women of all race groups who were in senior leadership positions (Senior inspectors, Heads of Departments, Chancellors, Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deans etc.) in higher education institutions eSwatini
- No limit was set for the duration that the senior position was held.
- Competence in the English language so as to be able to comprehend and respond appropriately to interview questions

### **Data Collection**

The data for this study was collected through face-to-face individual semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that help define areas to be explored (Gill et al., 2008). This type of approach assisted to guide the interviews while also allowing the flexibility of uncovering new information and exploring it. Face-to-face interviews were chosen because they allow for personal contact with the participants, and grant the researcher access to non-verbal interactions (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). The researcher's ability to get comfortable and articulate questions vividly to the participant, allowed the participant to

understand the questions and give appropriate responses. Therefore, improving the quality of data, as compared to telephone or mail interviews (Adhabi & Anozie 2017). Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research and are cited as the most frequent qualitative data source in research. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences in senior leadership positions (see Appendix C). Participants were afforded the opportunity to speak freely about their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives, thereby producing data which is personal and subjective to their own lived realities and experiences (Foxcroft & Roodt, 2013).

The data collection phase of this research study was adapted from Leedy and Ormrod's (2014) typology for phenomenological research and used the following sequence: Once permission to proceed with the study was granted and ethical approval had been obtained from the Psychology Department's Research Ethics Committee at the University of Cape Town, I obtained approval through the Principal Secretary to conduct the proposed study from the Director of eSwatini's Ministry of Education (see Appendix F). A list of documents was submitted, these included: the research proposal, a list of universities and colleges that I would approach, a letter signed by this research supervisor and a sample of the consent form was submitted to the Principal Secretary (PS). Once clearance on conducting the study had been granted, a call for research participants was circulated to institutions of higher learning eSwatini including the government inspectorate department (regional and senior inspectors). The advert contained information of the study, the aims, procedures, time commitment, risks to participants and goals to be achieved (see Appendix A).

Two participants in the senior inspectorate were given the advert to circulate and recruit members to participate in the study. Thereafter the process of snowballing took place. Those who were willing to participate contacted me telephonically or via email, my contact information was available on the advert. Every individual who expressed interest to participate in the research study was cross-referenced against the aforementioned inclusion criteria. This cross-referencing was done either telephonically, by asking the participants to answer either 'yes' or 'no' as to whether each of the inclusion criteria applied to them. Individuals who met these criteria received further communication in order to establish a suitable time and date for the interview to take place. Each participant was asked to indicate their availability for their interview, and a suitable date and time chosen to accommodate the participants' schedules. I informed the participants of the estimated duration of the interview phase which was between 45-60 minutes in length. On the interview day

allocated to each participant I discussed the reasons for the study and consent form. I additionally informed the participants that all of the data I received would be kept private and secure, and that their interviews would be audio recorded. In return, I asked each participant to state any hesitations they may have when it comes to taking part in study, and no participant was interviewed prior to signing the consent form.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis is a method used for examining perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences in participants' views, and generating unanticipated insights (Nowell et al., 2017). A thematic analysis offers an accessible and theoretically-flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was the most suited form of analyzing women's experiences in this study. Since qualitative analysis does not need participants to answer rigid questions, thematic analysis was the most appropriate method for analyzing participants' in-depth experiences. This analysis allowed me to reflect on participants' statements throughout the whole process from the point of data collection till the write up and conclusion. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) typography of a qualitative data analysis, the study adopted the following steps:

#### **Phase 1: Familiarizing myself with data**

This step required me to engage with the primary data, which was collected through an app that recorded audio and transcribed the data simultaneously. All data collected was transferred to a locked file in my computer. Each document was labelled and saved individually with a pseudonym of each participant. The participants' documents were saved in the order of participant interviews. Once each participant was allocated a pseudonym, I went through each participant document by listening to audio while reading each transcription in order to ensure that the data was transcribed accurately. I corrected any errors that I came across which were not transcribed correctly. Specific ideas and thoughts were written down in the note pad used during participant interviews.

#### **Phase 2: Generating initial codes**

The second phase involved identifying preliminary codes. A code is a label assigned to a piece of text, and the aim of using a code is to identify and summarise important concepts within a set of

data (Crosely, 2021). These preliminary codes consisted of data that had been broken down and came across as interesting and meaningful. I highlighted each code with a particular color and made notes against each code. With my note pad, I noted each color against the code. Once the color coding had taken place as I re-read the data and analyzed audio recordings, themes began to emerge.

### **Phase 3: Searching for themes**

The aforementioned smaller components of the interviews and narratives were then grouped into themes. A theme is a recurring idea, or topic that appears in the written work obtained from interview transcripts (Clarke & Braun, 2014). I copied and pasted codes into the same color-coded themes on a fresh Word document, and I also gave the themes temporal titles. Themes were grouped and coded according to major ideas that were relevant in the study. The relation between the themes and subthemes formed reflections of the experiences of women in senior positions, as expressed by the participants.

### **Phase 4: Reviewing themes**

Throughout the process of re-reading and listening to audio recordings, I kept adding new codes to the various topics as I came across them. I rearranged several codes to fit into various themes. I removed any data that did not correspond to the selected themes at this point. I refined and placed clear identifiable distinctions between the themes. This was done over two phases, Phase 1-themes were checked against coded extracts, Phase 2- themes checked against codes extracted from phase 1.

### **Phase 5: Defining and naming**

This step focused on the refining and defining of the themes and subthemes within the data. I constantly reviewed my data and made any additional edits to enhance the identified themes. There were four primary themes, each of which has subthemes. There were several instances of themes and sub-themes being renamed. An overall description of the study experiences of women in senior leadership positions was identified based on various possible meaningful units and explanations.

### **Phase 6: Producing the report**

The final step included a report of the results of the analysis of the data collected. After every theme and subtheme was assigned a heading and put together, I worked through one concept at a time, numbering each one and saving them on separate documents. I, thereafter, read what the literature had to say about that specific subtheme and considered its significance as I was writing up the findings. When I needed further information on a particular participant's statement at this point, I continued referring to audio recordings and transcripts. Throughout the writing process, I had to rearrange certain data because it was no longer relevant to that specific theme. I had to make sure that my work was impartial and that it accurately reflected the experiences of participants, so I was always in reflective mode in the write-up of the report.

### **Ethical considerations**

#### **Informed consent**

Due to the ethical requirements of conducting research with human participants, informed consent is a vital part in the study. Informed consent allowed me to give the participants an overview of the proposed study and help them understand the reasons for the study. This is also the time where I was able to highlight any risks or benefits associated with the study. I explained the consent form (see Appendix B) and discussed the process, purpose, and duration of the interview with each potential participant. In as much detail as possible, I explained that the interview would consist of the participants verbally answering the open-ended, semi-structured interview questions in a manner which closely resembled a loosely structured conversation between myself and the participant. I explained the purpose of the research, which was towards the completion of the MA in Psychological Research at the University of Cape Town. I further asked for permission from the participants to take fieldnotes throughout the interview as well as to record the session with an audio recorder.

The informed consent form was discussed point-by-point prior to the interview commencing, after which the participants were given space to clarify any discrepancies, ask questions, and request further information or decline from participating in the study. Once the participants had consented to me taking fieldnotes and recording the session, returned the signed informed consent form, and had been given a platform to ask questions and receive clarification,

then the face-to-face interview commenced. The interviews were conducted in English, participants were encouraged throughout the interview process to give as much detail with as many examples as possible in response to interview questions.

Throughout the interview process, I made fieldnotes and observations which were relayed back to the participants so as to verbally ascertain their accuracy in representing their perspectives. Furthermore, particular attention was given to any additional information that arose out of the sessions such as participant's subtle body movements, micro-expressions, pauses, questions, and possible diversions from the main discussion which is derived from the prescribed interview schedule.

At the conclusion of the interview phase a debriefing session took place, during which participants were afforded the opportunity to reflect on the session, ask questions, provide feedback, and assess their general mood in response to the interview session. Lastly, I requested that the participants reach out to other individuals who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate in the research study, after which I closed the proceedings and the participants were free to leave the interview session.

### **Participants reflexivity**

All participants stated their eagerness to see what this study will capture. Due to the nature of the study allowing participants to explore and reflect on the interview, it was crucial to include their reflections, as these reflections form part future recommendations for further research to be conducted. Therefore, these were reflections made by participants once the interviews were completed. Sbonelewe reflected on how she believed this particular study should have also questioned what society identifies as a leader, whether they identified leadership with a male or female. Thandeka considered how the study had aided her to reflect on her journey, as she had not been able to do, as she had experienced her work as a senior leader in isolation. Additionally, she had not taken time to think of her own challenges. Thoko reflected on how she found value in the study as it is of a qualitative nature, stating that she realised that the study would draw its findings from real stories, and that the data would be used to generate results which would give insight on women's experiences of being in leadership positions.

## **Confidentiality**

Privacy and confidentiality are aspects that give protection to participants who take part in any research process. Privacy is protection of information or data shared by the participant. This can also include privacy of their identity. I outlined the measures to be taken to ensure that participants' data remain confidential. Furthermore, I took note of potential risks relating to data leaks. Bos (2020) notes that digitalization has increased the potential to collect, analyze, and store information, but this era has also encountered new privacy risks. I assured the participants in this study that the data retrieved from them would be coded and not attached to their names so as to prevent re-identification if any leaks may take place. Re-identification may cause problems to participants as their information may be viewed negatively by their places of work, therefore risking their employment. Therefore, I used a pseudonym to refer to each participant to protect them from any harm. All data was stored in a secure place, fieldnotes were put in a lockable compartment, audio files and transcripts were stored on a computer file with a password.

## **Harm**

Researchers have a duty to protect the rights of participants involved in scientific investigations. These rights include protection of life, health, dignity and integrity (Yip et al., 2016). The safety and wellbeing of the participants is a fundamental aspect during the research process. The process of ensuring their safety was achieved by maintaining a professional and forthright decorum throughout the research process and conducting interviews in a safe environment. In the event of participants experiencing any distress during or after the interview, contact details for Courage to Conquer, Ministry of Health, and Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGGA) were provided (see appendix D). These organisations work with women who face any physical or psychological distress and not only abuse. These contact details were attached to the consent form provided to each participant. The purpose of the information was to make sure that participants knew how to get help if they were psychologically affected by the study or if it brought up any previously forgotten distressing recollections.

## **Reflexivity**

Researchers are encouraged to maintain a self-critical account of the research process (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Consequently, one of the most important considerations I had to make

when I was analyzing and writing about this study was race. eSwatini adopted the term "colored" from South Africa without realizing that their context differed from that of the country of origin. Most of the people who are colored in eSwatini are descended from white settlers who had relationships with Black Women. The children born to white settlers with Black native Women were subsequently referred to as colored because of their complexion, which was similar to that of South Africa, their neighbor. However, language (Siswati and English) and culture were preserved, and white settlers also embraced the culture and language to blend in with Swazi people. Speaking Afrikaans is therefore uncommon among colored people in eSwatini, unless they were taught it in school. Therefore, nothing appeared particularly strange despite having a white grandfather because he spoke siSwati most of the time and most family get-togethers included both black and colored people. More significantly, when I mentioned my surname (Dlamini) to strangers, they would argue that it wasn't my true surname because my appearance was classified with a colored one. Having been brought up in eSwatini as a person of mixed race and in a blended family, I initially did not recognize race. Moving to South Africa and being identified as a Black women pushed me to engage with questions around race and the ways in which it shapes people's experiences and realities in varying contexts. My understanding of race shifted after experiencing race in the context of South Africa. South Africa has increased racial tensions as a result of the former apartheid government. In contrast to South Africa, the repercussions of apartheid were less severe in eSwatini, a neighboring country. There was no segregation that I was aware of during my prior education in eSwatini, where all races were taught in the same classroom. I was first made aware of segregation while attending boarding school in KwaZulu Natal (South Africa), where students were grouped according to race and instructed to raise our hands in order to count the various racial groups present in the classroom. The effects of comprehending race in a different context made the process of figuring out one's identity extremely perplexing and isolating. Being forced to alter one's identity depending on the situation required a great deal of self-awareness. My definitions of race and its meaning has since been shaped by the South African context, however, it is crucial for me to reflect on race as understood in the context of eSwatini, which is where this study was located. The findings of this study do not reflect race as prominent in shaping women's experiences, due the minimal experiences of racial tensions eSwatini, compared to other contexts such as South Africa. Had my research topic been based in South Africa, race would have been a crucial element within the findings. Age is another issue I had to reflect on as research

has shown that most senior leadership positions are taken up by older women. Therefore, it was important for me to understand that such potential age differences between myself and participants could impact on my interaction and the information they provide. Though I kept this in mind, age did not seem to impact my interactions with participants during the interviews, at least that I became aware of it. According to Dodgson (2019), a researcher's description of the relationships between the participants and themselves increases the likelihood of their findings being credible and deepens understanding of the study. From my interactions with participants in this study, it did not seem as though who I am or who I presented as, had an impact on this study or what participants shared with me. I do acknowledge, however, that this does not mean that there were not factors that impacted how participants interacted with me and that there may have been information withheld from me due to participants' perceptions of me. Another noteworthy aspect of my reflections was that I identified with the majority of the women because I also have a family (a husband and child) and hold a senior position in my workplace. However, throughout the study, I became aware of the inequalities that women face in the workplace, which made me ask what are the drivers as to why women choose to pursue senior leadership positions when society still expects them to work twice as hard and still fulfil their responsibilities at home. How can a woman truly embrace her role at work, fully integrate herself into conscience parenting, and avoid burnout? How can we, as women, combat workplace unfairness and eliminate burnout from so many socially prescribed roles? Or would it be more appropriate to emphasize the unpaid responsibilities we play in the home and establish these as paid positions instead? Because the injustices struck a deep chord with me and I had to continually consider my unconscious biases, which would have impacted the study had I not been aware of them, it was crucial for me to document these questions within my reflections.

## Findings and Discussion

A qualitative research approach was used to understand the experiences of twenty (20) women in senior leadership positions at higher education institutions in eSwatini. All twenty (20) participants were interviewed using semi-structured face-to-face interviews, and while a few words were occasionally said in Siswati, all interviews were conducted in English. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis were used to analyse the data. The findings and conclusions drawn from the data are covered in the sections that follow and are based on four major themes that are related to women in senior positions and their experiences in higher education in eSwatini. The four main themes are: 1) Societal expectations (focusing on gender and culture); 2) Family-work conflict; 3) Barriers and challenges to women's advancement and effective leadership; and 4) Learning and development, as shown in table 1 below which also includes the sub-themes under each main theme. I start this discussion by reflecting on participants' demographic information, which helps us make sense of the findings discussed in this section.

**Table 1: Themes and sub-themes**

<b>Theme 1</b>	<b>Theme 2</b>	<b>Theme 3</b>	<b>Theme 4</b>
<b>Societal expectations: Gender and culture</b>	<b>Family-work conflict</b>	<b>Barriers and challenges to women's advancement and effective leadership</b>	<b>Promoting women's advancement and effective leadership</b>
<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Institutional shifts	Cultural roles	Procedures for promotions and advancement	Mentorship
Men are still Leading in senior positions	Work-Family balance	Isolation in the workplace	Empowerment, delegation and team work
Societal stereotypes and discrimination in the workplace	Career breaks	Lack of financial and professional support	Being knowledgeable and passionate
Intersectionality, gender and ageism	Inequitable division of labour	Gender socialization during childhood	
Physical appearance	Mom guilt	Gender, work and self-esteem	
Gendered career choices	Support system from family		
Marriage and social status			
Men assumed to be better leaders			
Sexual harassment			

### Participants' demographic information

The information presented in the tables below is important in that it will aid the reader in understanding the interpretations and conclusions by giving them a better understanding of the participants. Although the study speaks to women who are currently in senior positions, two (2) of twenty (20) women are currently retired. The two (2) retired participants responded to the invitation and added valuable data to the study, which informed the decision to include the information they provided as they had extensive experience of being in senior leadership positions. Of the 20 (100%) women, 12 (60%) were aged between 50-59, 4 (20%) were aged between 40-49, 1 (5%) was aged between 30-39, and 3 (15%) were aged between 60-69 (see table 2). Therefore, majority of participants were aged between 50-59 (60%). Nine (45%) participants were married, six (30%) participants were single, two (10%) participants were divorced and three (15%) participants were widowed. Only one (1) out of the twenty (20) participants identified as coloured<sup>1</sup>, the majority (95%) identified as Black (see table 2). All twenty women indicated that they have children, seven (35%) of the participants stated that they have three (3) children, five (25%) stated that they have two (2) children, six (30%) stated that they have one (1) child each, and two (10%) stated that they have four (4) children. The two (2) participants who stated that they have four (4) children made note that the children were inclusive of adoptive children which included nieces, nephews and grandchildren (see table 2).

**Table 2: Participant Demographic Information**

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Marital Status	Children
Thandi	38	Black	Single	1
Elizabeth	40	Black	Married	3
Grace	47	Black	Single	1
Nomfundo	51	Black	Married	3
Linda	57	Black	Single	1
Bhekile	42	Black	Married	3
Thandeka	44	Black	Single	1
Nomcebo	52	Black	Single	1

<sup>1</sup> Colored in this context refers to a person who is of mixed race (White and Black parents, or colored and black parents, or white and colored parents) as understood eSwatini.

Sbonelwe	52	Black	Married	2
Thoko	65	Black	Single	1
Gugu	54	Black	Married	4
Lihle	55	Black	Divorced	2
Nothando	52	Black	Married	3
Nomzamo	52	Black	Widow	2
Gcebile	51	Black	Married	4
Nombuso	59	Black	Widow	2
Nomsa	50	Black	Divorced	2
Anele	50	Black	Married	3
Angel	64	Coloured	Married	3
Sandra	64	Black	Widow	3

The majority (65%) of participants held a Masters level qualification, while the remaining seven (35%) participants held a PhD - one of them a full Professor. Of the participants who held a Masters, two indicated that they were working towards their PhDs (see table 3 below).

**Table 3: Participants' educational qualifications and current positions**

Pseudonym	Educational Level	Position (Duration)	Field
Thandi	Masters	Senior Inspector (8yrs)	Languages
Elizabeth	Masters	Director (3yrs)	Economics
Grace	Masters	Senior Inspector (+10yrs)	Sciences
Nomfundo	Masters	Senior Inspector (+10yrs)	Humanities
Linda	Masters	Vice Principal (2yrs)	Commerce
Bhekile	PHD	Director (3yrs)	Medicine
Thandeka	Masters	Principal (2yrs)	Education
Nomcebo	Masters	Senior Inspector (10yrs)	Languages
Sbonelwe	PHD	Vice Chancellor (1yr)	Education
Thoko	PHD	HOD (N/A)	Humanities
Gugu	Masters	Principal (2yrs)	Education
Lihle	PHD	Vice Principal (3yrs)	Education
Nothando	Masters	HOD (+10yrs)	Languages

Nomzamo	Masters	HOD (-1yr)	Languages
Gcebile	Masters	Deputy REO (-1yr)	Education
Nombuso	PHD	HOD (+10yrs)	Education
Nomsa	PHD	HOD (5yrs)	Sciences
Anele	Masters	HOA (5yrs)	Business
Angel	Masters	Senior Inspector (5years)	Sciences
Sandra	Professor	Dean (5yrs)	Education

Five (25%) participants held the position as HoDs, followed by five (25%) participants who held positions of Senior Inspectorate. Other positions included that of Vice Chancellor (1), Dean (1), Director (2), Principal (2), Vice Principal (2), Deputy Regional Education Officer (1), and Head of Academics (1), as shown in table 3 above. Participants were in varying fields of study including, education, languages (English, Siswati & French), commerce, sciences and humanities. More than half of the participants, eleven (11), have been in senior positions for five or more years (see table 3).

Senior inspectorates were responsible for developing teaching syllabus for teachers as well as the monitoring and evaluation of teaching in their specific subject areas across all the academic institutions in eSwatini. They spoke of the responsibilities of regulating and implementing policies within eSwatini's academic institutions (in both higher and lower education). Participants in the head of department roles managed their departments and implemented new systems there. They also had the role of overseeing lecturers' responsibilities within the department and dealing with any staff grievances pertaining to the institution as well as personal. Participants who held the position of Principal stated that their roles consisted of managing their institutions, attending governmental policymaking conferences, and contributing to policy making. The Vice Principal (VP) stated that among her responsibilities were controlling various facets of the institution, such as dealing with directives received from the government through the principal, as well as managing HoDs and their departments. The VP indicated that the implementation of policy within the institution was her primary responsibility rather than participating in the creation of government policy. The head of academics (HOA) oversees and manages all four faculties within the institution which runs about 17 programs. It is significant to note that the majority of respondents have many

years of experience and were able to give quality information regarding their experiences, as more than half of the participants have held a position for more than five years.

### **Societal expectations: Gender and culture**

Society's expectations on how people behave are deeply embedded in culture. Culture refers to society's way of life. It is defined as a set of values and beliefs, or a cluster of learned behaviours that we share with others in a particular society, giving us a sense of belonging and identity (Lebron, 2013). Culture is seen to dictate the norms of a particular society, therefore leading to social conditioning and gendered stereotypes. In this particular context, one refers to Swazi culture which as stated by Nyawo (2014), is a socio-cultural religious construction, embedded in patriarchal structures and systems. The patriarchal systems uphold and reinforce inequalities between men and women. Regarding the role that "culture" plays in maintaining patriarchy and keeping masculinity as supreme, Kamalizeni et al.'s (2021) perspective is in line with Nyawo's. Kamalizeni et al. (2021) further state that traditional practices tend to play an overriding role in shaping leadership roles in the workplace, often placing preference on masculinity. Historically, men in eSwatini often placed themselves in senior positions in the workplace, while women's traditional roles were to be more submissive and under a man's directive at home. There has, however, been a slow shift within institutions with more women taking on leadership positions.

### ***Institutional shifts***

The glass ceiling theory as mentioned by Kulkarni and Mishra (2022) is defined as an invisible barrier that blocks women from rising above certain positions in corporations. Changes in the workplace have required some barriers to be dismantled, allowing for women to take up more senior positions. Hlanze (2015), a gender links Swaziland barometer researcher, mentions culture as a major obstacle to achieving gender equality in eSwatini. He states that although strides have been made to promote gender equality and break through the glass ceiling, women still face cultural practices that discriminate against them in eSwatini. Swazi cultural practices still place men as the head of the family, also translating into the workplace, creating the perception of men as better leaders. Yet there is a shift, more women are applying for senior positions within the workplace in various fields, including educational institutions. Gugu (54) who has held her position (principal) for two years recognises the institutional shifts as she states that men

previously held the position that she now holds, *“I guess I’m the first female principal in this institution. All the others were males from the time of its inception, in 1982.”* Thandeka (44) who like Gugu also held her position for two years, speaks to how she too was the first woman in her position:

*Oh, by the way I am the first female in this office and maybe even the youngest...(giggles) yeah, that’s what I gathered from others, that it has never happened, that we have had a female principal in the college.*

Participants noted that men had always taken rank over them. Linda (57) who is Vice Principal, had been in the educational institution for twenty-nine (29) years, starting as a lecturer and advancing gradually to her current position. She has held the Vice Principal position since 2020, and her observation of the institution suggests that there has been a change within the institution due to government’s progressive take on gender related issues:

*...Like I’ve just said, the women empowerment, is less than 10 years. Where we had to have the principal as a woman and the vice principal as a woman... I think it was the government’s change of a system, they were considering the gender issues management...*

**Linda**

### **Men are still leading in senior positions**

However, in spite of the institutional shifts, the article written by Khutsala Artisans (2022) titled *‘How to create hope in 2022 for eSwatini women’* indicates that women are still at a constant battle for job opportunities. The Human Rights Watch (2021) highlights the under-representation of women in eSwatini’s leadership and decision-making positions, in both private and public sectors. The article states that men are still predominantly the ones taking up senior leadership positions. The majority (14) of participants in this study stated that they reported to a male senior and make reference to how most men are still leading in senior positions:

*...It has been a male since this centre has been established...I think as a university it’s pretty much dominated by men. Our management is dominated by men. When I talk of the Management Committee, the administrative management committee, which is AMC, there are about 11 members, and there were only three females. **Elizabeth***

And

*... I report to the Pro Vice Chancellor, who reports to the Vice Chancellor...they are all male (laughs) ... so the entire management is male. Bhekile*

All twenty (20) participants made comments of how culture has shaped their experiences. Swazi culture sets certain principles and ideologies that inform how women see themselves. Of the twenty participants, four stated they had previously lacked the motivation to advance in their careers. For instance, three (3) participants said that their ability to advance to senior positions was largely influenced by their cultural socialization as caretakers, with their primary responsibilities having previously been at home. Thoko (65), who had achieved her PhD when she was thirty-seven (37) years old, indicates that she had no ambition towards advancing in the workplace, she was at the university with hopes of taking part in research and community engagements. Instead, she was met with the obligations of teaching which was her least favourite. While she had advanced to the position of head of department, she avoided having to advance to Deanship and other more senior positions:

*In terms of advancing to senior leadership I tried to avoid it. I always ran away from leadership positions. You know, I mean, people would come to me and say, oh, why don't you apply for senior lectureship? I used to say, that will come with being head of department. And then at some point, you guys will be saying, okay, Deanship. I don't want that. And it was really not my colleagues. It was not the institution but it was just I would rather do other things at church, at home, I just did not have the or do you call it ambition?...*

Cultural socialization as referred to by Wang and Benner (2017) refers to the developmental processes through which children learn about traditions of culture and attain cultural beliefs and values. Societal expectations and norms dictate how Swazi women should present themselves culturally in eSwatini. Stewart et al. (2021) draws on personal norms which define what women think of themselves and their abilities. Nombuso (59) justified her lack of motivation to advance by asserting that senior positions bring about a lot of responsibilities that she was not willing to deal with, she suggests that this lack of motivation was linked to how she was culturally socialized:

*I just prefer being here in the middle management... I don't like being too senior and being exposed to criticism, attacks, I don't like that... probably it's because of how we were brought up as females and that has influenced my thinking... I think there has been about four vice principals that have changed while I was here, but I never applied...*

In Wilson's (2023) article, "Cultural conditioning: How the world influences our beliefs and behaviour" she explains how siblings can grow up in the exact same household and share the same experiences, yet enter the world as adults with totally different perspectives. These perspectives are based on how they absorb and interpret their culture as children. Thoko (65) explains how cultural conditioning can have an impact on girl children. She mentions how a girl child is culturally conditioned into certain roles from an early age. Thoko suggests that girl children are deterred from associating with 'boy' items or even positions that are associated with boys. This, she says, has a negative impact on women's self-esteem, as they grow up being conditioned and socialised into certain cultural roles, which are accepted by society as female roles. She further says that, once women go into leadership roles, which culturally were reserved for men, they are forced to continuously rework their mindset so as to believe that they are capable of being leaders:

*...So, somebody has an event to say take your girl child to work. By the time the damage is done, I think the damage is done. It needs to be a more a continuous effort to get the mindset of acceptance...So by the time I am a woman in a leadership position, I'm still fighting those self because I'm saying self-inflicted, but really, it's not. Its society inflicted, society starting from the family starting from preschool, high school to say don't go to school. Don't do that. Don't play with the boys. These are the girl things, you know. So, by that time I am a lecturer at the university, or I'm a leader. I'm still needing to be taken out of these things that are within me that I've been absorbing all my life so for me personally the barriers really. Were within me to say I was not driven or motivated enough. **Thoko***

Social cognitive theory is a framework used by Serra et al. (2019) in their study to help identify gendered career choices. They list self-efficacy as a reason behind an individual's motivation into certain career paths. Serra et al. (2019) mention self-efficacy as an individual's belief about their capability to achieve a desired outcome on expectations of actions required to achieve the outcome. They continue to highlight that social agents such as upbringing, family and culture have a major

impact on individuals navigating their career paths. Within this study we note how Nothando (52) highlights her lack of motivation by taking her surrounding environment and upbringing into consideration as reasons for not advancing to a more senior position, *“I suppose it is lack of motivation. On my side, maybe I wasn’t surrounding myself with people that would motivate me to continue.”* Nomzamo (52) cites her perceived lack of the relevant academic qualification as her reason for not applying for senior positions at the time they were advertised:

*...But I never applied for that post because to me... I had that... I do not have a PhD...because I knew I was going to compete with people with PhDs...unfortunately, someone who has a master’s degree like myself got the post. So, I said Oh, anyway. Yeah, I had thought they were going to consider qualifications in those positions.*

Though culturally, Swazi women have been limited in terms of the positions they can take on outside of the home, institutional shifts have allowed more women to be assertive in their work place. According to a study conducted in 2021, 46% of women in eSwatini were participating in the nations labour force (Tsabedze, 2023). Although this seems like a small percentage, Tsabedze (2023) noted that this was the official labour participation and that SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) were not included in the study as they were not officially registered. As a result, the data's exact proportion of women's representation still doesn't accurately reflect the full level of women's labour force participation. The complex phenomenon of gender disparity in the workplace are evident in organizational structures, procedures, and practices (Starmarski & Son Hing, 2015). Sandra (64) shared her viewpoint regarding gender-based restrictions, indicating her perception of herself as an equally capable human being, *“One of the things about me is that I don't really see myself as a woman. I see myself as a human being...”* She further acknowledged the prevalence of male dominance in the workplace:

*...all my life I've been in a situation where I find myself in meetings where I'm the only woman or having only two women amongst men. And, of course, you know, men have egos. And really, they normally want to pull down the women, you know, like, you a woman shut up and that kind of thing. I've always been able to stand up to any man actually. I see everybody as a human being...so I don't see any challenges that I have had that I can say it's because I'm a woman.*

When asked if she has had challenges with her female counterparts, Sandra responded by saying; *“No I have never, although ...I’ve had challenges with men. Okay, because like when I was to become a professor, my Vice Chancellor then felt I was rising too fast...he blocked me...”*, Sandra stated how she refused to allow domineering men to limit her advancement.

### ***Societal stereotypes and discrimination in the workplace***

Gender stereotypes are preconceived ideas whereby males and females are assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their sex. Stewart et al. (2021) state that stereotypes include attitudes, behavioural intentions and enacted behaviours that are shaped and reinforced and have an effect on structures and systems that support inequalities. This study’s findings consider that stereotypes influence women’s progression within institutions of higher learning eSwatini. The basis of stereotypes formed include gender, age, physical appearance and social standing in the community.

### **Intersectionality, gender and ageism**

Gender stereotyping is considered to be a significant issue hindering the career progression of women in senior positions (Tabassum et al., 2021). Women in eSwatini face the difficulty of having to navigate between the intersections of gender and age, which further exacerbate the challenges they face in their work place. When Thandi (38) began her position as the only female in her department, she remembers juggling issues of gender and age. Thandi mentions having to prove herself amongst her male counterparts.

*...males, there are some that are actually older than me. So now you have to prove yourself and you know, there's always that male ego thing that comes up now and then that you need to try and suppress...*

Seven participants speak to how age negatively impacted their experiences as they navigated their way in the workplace and advanced. Ageism is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination against individuals on the basis of their age (Bae & Choi, 2022). Raj (2022) states that while ageism can be positive or negative for an individual, it generally carries a negative connotation. Raj (2022) further goes on to say that age-based research found that younger employees were perceived as lazy, less organised, selfish and poorly motivated because of age. As a result, younger employees were overlooked for senior positions and they

received lower pay than similarly experienced older employees. Women who are younger experience greater resistance, as Swazi culture views a woman as “a child”. Bronga (2018) mentions that Swazi women lack legal rights because they are not legally considered equal to men. Therefore, younger women face more challenges in the workplace, even against older women. This study’s findings noted challenges for some participants who had entered the institution when they were in their 20s and 30s. These participants refer to instances where age was amongst their major barriers. Nomfundo (51) expressed her experience of how age and Swazi culture played a huge role in the way she had to deal with conflict in the workplace. She observes respect as a core principle of overcoming this challenge when she entered the Ministry at the age of 26 years:

*...But I'll go to a meeting and they tell me to my face, you know nothing, just because you have papers (as in qualifications), it doesn't mean you're better than me... I had to grow quickly. Mature quickly... When I joined the ministry or government, they were old people in positions, even positions that are not senior. You know, people that are old, so when you come in, they just look at you and they think what is this school child doing here...but I had to have the courage to deal with it all. One thing I will not do is lose control, I will be respectful but I will confront whatever is my limitation...Nomfundo*

Nomsa (50) similarly recalls her experience of having to deal with her older colleagues as she had returned to the institution where she had previously studied. Upon her return to the institution, she took on a senior position and was met with the challenge of having to work alongside her “elders” who had previously taught her:

*I mentioned that I also studied in the same institution? And then joining the institution, I found several of the people who taught me, so there was that element even though it was not voiced out. I think also because of our culture with an adult and a junior staff member. So, there was that dynamic. But fortunately for me, I would say they embraced me as their counterpart. It's just that somewhat it will come in in certain ways which, by the way, they are your seniors, by the way, they are older than you, by the way they taught you, but it was not them enforcing it. It was just the dynamic and the cultural thing, that they are old we must respect them and stuff like that.*

Swazi culture requires younger women to always show respect to their elders. Elders are deemed as more knowledgeable and have more wisdom. Reuben et al. (2022) state that younger adults are

more likely to suffer age discrimination in a country with stronger structural support for older people. Fuente-Nunez et al. (2021) reported that younger employees tend to feel undervalued and are perceived as incompetent and receive fewer development opportunities. They further state that middle aged employees tend to hold more negative stereotypes of younger workers. Age-related stereotypes further affect individuals' experiences in an institution, this is further detailed by Thandeka and Nomfundo below:

*...when you are appointed, people, they don't want to accept what's now, especially the males. They don't want to accept that. Now you are in charge with authority over them so there's normally that little resistance. Like it's even worse for me because of the age part, that most people felt like I'm young, some would even verbalize and say that they are not even going to report to her. **Thandeka***

And

*...They used to say you don't belong here...and these are old men and women who knew their positions and they made sure you knew, if you are not senior, until they discussed with my senior and he said never mind her title we need her skill...So I would go into meetings and you know because of my age, sometimes they would say the youngest should...(giggles)...they would give me responsibilities because I'm the youngest...like go and make tea...like there is no chair...stand up... go and get a chair so that a senior person can sit down. That was a learning experience, I am reciting it now and I don't feel any pain. But back then when I would wake up at home, I would say I do not want to go to work. Because I would cry every day, come back from work, we are in bed and I would just break down.” **Nomfundo***

Linda (57) pointed out her experience and the differences she noticed in how government institutions receive younger women versus private institutions. She suggests that promotions for younger women occur easier in private institutions, while in government it is still very difficult to be promoted to senior positions. She states that even when one does attain a position at a young age, they will be faced with many challenges:

*...You can have your doctorate, but if you are young, the possibilities of you getting promoted are very slim. The chances of you getting a promotion are almost a zero... But*

*somehow from experience, I've noticed that the way government operates is completely different from the private sector. So even if you can get promoted as a young female, you will never survive in government... It's not an easy task. Linda*

### **Physical appearance**

Beyond gender and age-related stereotypes, Grace (47) was most affected by her tiny physical appearance. The most of her problems when she first entered the institution were caused by her relatively small body size. Little and Roberts (2012) state the importance of visual characteristics in a workplace and how they impact others' judgements towards an individual. They link physical attributes of tall women in leadership positions as positive, these women are likely to be rated as more intelligent, assertive and more ambitious than shorter women. Therefore, within her experience, Grace, who has a small body, explained how her place of work expected a woman to fill that role but did not anticipate someone with her small frame. She further highlighted how her physical appearance affected her experience negatively as she constantly had to prove her capabilities at work:

*I think the mere fact I came as a young lady, even though I was not young in terms of age, but when I appeared to them, I looked young...So, it was easy for people to understand that they expected a woman to be in this position, however, not a woman of my structure because if you are in senior position, they expect you to be somewhat of a certain body size. And also, you had to do a lot of convincing, I had to do a lot of convincing... I've experienced even when I was teaching that people did not expect much from me because of my body size...Remember I told you that I'm tiny and have to convince people, so it means I had to do a lot of background research before going anywhere. So that I convince people. Dealing also with school administrators. I'll tell you a joke about this one... when I started, I went to... cause also it involves me going to the schools now to inspect. So, I went, it was during the time when schools had just opened, I went to this school, the head teacher was busy with admissions... and then I think I was the third person on the line... finished with the two ladies that were in front of me and when I got in, he just looked up a bit, behind his desk, he said oh, just go away. I'm done with admissions. I don't want children. You know, you know that experience, I've experienced and I'm like... when I had*

*to say, I haven't come for that. He was... I felt for him because he was somewhat embarrassed. And I was also equally embarrassed. **Grace***

This view from Grace indicates that she was not only confronted with sexism in the workplace, but also ageism, and discrimination on the basis of her physical appearance. The convergence of these experiences may have a compounding effect on those affected, which is why it is important to highlight these intersections so as to clearly understand women's experiences in depth.

### **Gendered career choices**

Grace's views in the previous section on 'Physical Appearance' suggests to us that appearance is regarded as important within organisations, including institutions of higher learning. Not only is it important how one appears in institutions eSwatini, but women are also associated with certain career fields, as seen in the Swati culture which associates and asserts women in certain career fields. According to Seehuus (2021), cultural and economic factors that contribute to occupational gender segregation inform gendered job preferences. Seehuus (2021) continued by stating that one of the biggest obstacles to further cracking the glass ceiling in occupational gender segregation is men's unwillingness to taking up gender-atypical jobs. Seehuus' (2021) study conducted in Norway discovered that societal justifications for men choosing more masculine career fields of work resulted in gendered career choices. eSwatini is understood to be a patriarchal society, therefore, stereotypical roles reserved for women are soft skilled jobs. Waaijer et al. (2016) highlighted their study on graduates from Dutch Universities which indicated underrepresentation of women in engineering and the natural sciences. Linda, who earned her master's degree in gender issues and management, discussed how a study she conducted at a technological (sciences field) institution further revealed that women were more likely to work in low-paying, soft-skilled positions:

*...in terms of lecturers, 43 were male and only 10 were females and you would only find ladies in lower paying positions, like cleaner... that is where you would find women, or laundry or kitchen or cook or the like. That is where you find ladies. **Linda***

Nothando (52) who is in the language department noted how her department mainly consisted of women, "Generally, in the department that I am heading we have more female lecturers than male." Departments associated with soft skills were seen to have higher numbers of women. Linda

continues to explain that women would usually have qualifications for soft skilled faculties, these include faculty of education, Business Administration and ITC, noting engineering and science as male dominated fields:

*...the ladies, I would say because during those days, they would come into the institution to teach the soft programs, which is the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Business Administration, and probably the faculty of ICT. So, the only people who would come with first degrees and Masters would be those faculties and they will be women or female dominated as compared to the engineering and sciences, which are male dominated...Linda*

It was noted earlier on in this chapter that five (5) participants were linked to language departments (English, Siswati and French), four (4) participants were linked were linked to the Home Economics department (Consumer Sciences) and seven (7) participants were linked to education. This shows that the majority (16) of participants were in female dominated departments, while only four participants were in male dominated departments. This finding aligns with how Swazi society is more accepting of women being in soft skilled departments:

*But I didn't struggle much with people. Understanding why, I was a nutrition officer, I think because when it comes to nutrition and food, because its food related, it's always been known that it's a preserve for women. So, it was easy for people to understand that they expected a woman to be in this position. Grace*

Angel (64) also relates her experience of not having challenges with male counterparts as her field was also female dominated. She shares how gender dictates the career field one would most likely enter:

*In my field where I was... I didn't face that challenge because we were all female there was no male competing against us... it's the subject in most cases that determines the sex, because like in consumer science, there was no male who had my qualifications in my field of study, so obviously, it would be a female...*

Seehuus' (2021) investigation on gendered career choices focuses on adolescent's preferences and what they imagine their future field of employment would be. She states that these career choices

are made during upper-secondary learning. Similarly, in this study, Linda (57) suggests that girls should start to centre their career choices in the male dominated fields at an earlier age:

*...because in the engineering and sciences, the lecturers are all males. Until our girls start from scratch, you know, learning sciences. This starts in Form One (first year in high school).* **Linda**

By encouraging girls to enter into male-dominated fields from an earlier age, we will increase women's representation within these fields of work, lowering the disproportionate representation of men and the gendering of certain fields and disciplines.

### **Marriage and social status**

In Eswatini, Christianity is very important and is connected to cultural expectations. The '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom' produced by the United States Department of State, reported that religious leaders estimate that ninety percent (90%) of people are Christians, two percent (2%) are Muslims, and the other people belong to various religious organizations, including those who practice native African beliefs, according to a demographic report in eSwatini. Nyawo's (2020) study of women in leadership within the church highlights the challenges women in the church are faced with. He mentions that single mothers, unmarried women, and divorced or separated women have no roles in some mainstream churches and may be barred from holding office in church leadership. Therefore, in eSwatini, Since Christianity is the foundation of the majority of organizations, the connection between cultural practices and Christianity is developed at work. Cultural expectations are imposed on women to be married and have children by a certain age. Women who are not married or do not have children when they are older are usually frowned upon, which in turn affects women who want to advance in the workplace. Thoko (65), who has never been married and only had a child at the age of 30, details how the nurses teased her stating that she was old to be having a child at that age:

*I was never married. But I do have a 35-year-old daughter, had this daughter when I was 30 which was quite late for those days. Actually, when I was delivering, when I was in the delivery room, the matron called the student nurses to say... Oh, finally, we have an elderly Primigravida... (Thoko laughs) ...then I said, before they come, please tell me what it is that what is an elderly Primigravida. And then she said, well, usually, African women have*

*their first child 18, you hardly ever see anybody who has their first child after age 25, and here you are at age almost 31, you are having a child, so I want them to see you., I said what are they looking at? I didn't think I was that late. You know, I knew that... Most of my friends were married. I was not married. Most of my friends were married and had kids. Because this was like, nine years after I had my undergraduate degree so even then it was okay, I decided marriage was not an option but I wanted a child and I had a child.*

Women's social standing in eSwatini factors in their traditional roles, how well they perform in their traditional roles (child bearing and marriage) indicates their acceptability in a patriarchal society. Linda (47) also speaks to how she believes the institutions prefer hiring women who are married versus women who are not married:

**Linda:** *I discovered that when they are looking for candidates for promotion, they take it as a factor, they take into consideration if you are married or you are not married, And I don't know where it helps in the hierarchy of things, but it is there.*

**Interviewer:** *Do you believe in this case, it helped you...*

**Linda:** *It didn't help me. Okay, it actually, it becomes a disadvantage. It's not a written down rule of law. But the system... I think it's as how the society looks at it...I don't know what they think when they see a woman of my age not married versus one my age who is married...I don't know what they see. But the way their perception about it is that you are rude, that's why you're not married...you are rude, you are uncontrollable, you don't comply... I don't know...but there is that thing. And they use it when they ask you to introduce yourself (during an interview) ... I'm Sandra Messina initially, but I'm now married to... that's how they introduce themselves. To give themselves that status.*

Zenda (2020) suggests that regardless of the advantages of being married, women in eSwatini are faced with graver disadvantages in marriage, stating that men have more privileges and rights. According to Zenda (2020), married women need their husbands' permission before engaging in any formal activity, such as obtaining access to loans from financial institutions or purchasing land.

### **Men assumed to be better leaders**

Gender stereotyping remains prevalent despite the provision of equal opportunities in the workplace (Tabassum et al. 2021). Tabassum et al. (2021) state that the traditional attitudes of a patriarchal culture tend to produce masculine working environments where women lean towards men as leaders. They further state that while growing up, women are not included in family business practices and are therefore not considered as successors in the family, while men are. This further promotes the patriarchal culture where even women themselves associate leadership with masculinity and men. Patriarchal socialization leaves space for women to grow up understanding the role of a man to be a leader, with two participants in this study alluding to this notion. Nombuso (59) says *“Yes, I’m in management but I have the leeway of hiding behind them (men). Probably it’s because of how we were brought up as females... and that has influenced my thinking...”* Both participants are older (Age 59 & 65) in comparison to the other participants.

Thoko (65):

*“...And then when it became a faculty, I said, there is a man in the department who is a professor, let him be the Dean kind of thing. I didn't say it out, but that that was my thinking to say that that was the expectation. To say there's a man with a dean. I mean, who's a professor, let him be the Dean with all your experience with all my experience. It was like, give it to him. Or let him take it.”*

Thoko shares how she moved aside for her male counterpart to take the position of deanship. Thoko is aware that she had the same experience as her male counterpart. When given the opportunity to apply for the position of Dean, she automatically placed him as a “more suitable candidate”, as she knew society to favour a man over a woman in leadership positions. Some participants showed preference towards working with women as compared to men, *“I think male to female works best than female to female. I don't know why”* (Nomsa, 50). Similarly, Bhekile (42) who further details a negative experience of working with a female superior, states the following:

*Yeah, I think I've had worse experiences with females than I've had with the males. It's unfortunate I know. I had a very horrible experience. I think that is one area of growth that I have seen. And actually, that has made me to be passionate about women's leadership,*

*because I realize that when it comes to women leadership, either we are not capacitated or we come in wounded, and are fighting battles and then we will start pulling down others. I think that is, if I say it might be, the place where I've been at the most when it comes to women, because my previous director I said was a female. And I think we didn't have a really nice experience. I don't know it was and at that time, I was the only other female in the department and with male colleagues and I always felt side-lined more than the males. And we had battles I really didn't know why. Where they stem from. So yeah, it was a bit of a difficult situation I think yeah, for me, I think that that's the opportunity and the gaps I see. Also, when I interact with other females that I think we really need to build capacity for women leaders... **Bhekile***

The sentiment of males being easier to work with was shared by four participants in this study. These participants argued that males were less complicated and use less emotions, making it easier to work with them. Nombuso and Thandeka share their experiences below.

*Males are easy to work with, if the duties and responsibilities are clear. But with females you can never know what they want. Even if you can lay down the duties and expectations. It depends on which side of the bed they wake up, with females. But at the same time, I'm not ruling out that they are females that want to learn from you they cling on you to learn, but that's the problem... I don't know whether you will know better if it's our hormones...But it's very difficult to predict females. It's easy to predict men. **Nombuso (59)***

And

*With females, you must be very careful they know how to exaggerate...but it depends on personalities, they are so subjective...I observed women use emotions. Then the guys use logic and they are very economic with words. They speak very few words. **Thandeka (44)***

Contrary to the views shared by Nombuso and Thandeka, Tabassum and Nayak's (2021) study found that women in their study believed they were equally capable as men to be successful leaders, although they have different leadership characteristics. The characteristics stated by Tabassum and Nayak (2021) included being affectionate, friendly, sympathetic and interpersonally sensitive. Most participants believed that empathy was a trait that most male leaders did not carry,

which they believed made women better leaders. Vongas and Al Hajj (2015) argued that biology and culture play a role in the perceptions of women as more empathetic than men. Vongas and Al Hajj (2015) further suggest that women are more capable to lead in times of a crisis due to their empathetic nature. The majority of participants in this study thought their empathy made them more effective leaders than men, who they consider to be less empathetic. Nomzamo recalls an instance where empathy was used to resolve a crisis during a strike at her institution. Nomzamo shared how she empathetically spoke to students and swayed their decision to write their exams instead of striking:

*So, I called the four group leaders. They came to my office, I started talking to them trying to drive sense into their minds and I don't know what impact those words or advice had, because they started calling the minister of academics. The minister, academics came, they said, you know, our lecturer here has spoken to us and she has spoken to us as a mother versus a lecturer we think we should write the test... whilst they were writing I started seeing science teachers (male counterparts) waiting with their papers at the door wanting to take advantage... but with that point I'm trying to say I don't believe I'm weak...I remember I was empathizing with the students, that's why they were convinced.*

**Nomzamo**

Emotional intelligence, reflective abilities and empathy were identified by Stanley et al. (2018) as important professional attributes for leaders in academic institutions. Similarly, participants present empathy as a positive characteristic in leadership, but maintain that leaders should still be able to uphold the principles and be able to separate work from personal matters. For example;

*...One new staff member... She was not performing to expectation such that she found herself in my office more than anyone else. And someone could have taken it personal but it's not personal as long as the work gets done. That's how I separate work and the personal relationship. And then she lost a child. I became this... you switch the roles now to say, your subordinate has lost the child you need to be seen... to be seen to be supportive. That's where the empathy game came in... yet, I don't think she would have expected me to behave the way I behaved. But because I can separate work from the personal stuff. I knew that someone who's lost a child needs your support needs your understanding. She left during exams, we marked her, close to 70 scripts. We just told her*

*not to stress about that because she's bereaved, she should just focus on that. The very same person I was seen to be hard on because of non-performance. So as long as the empathy doesn't interfere with delivery, doesn't interfere with the work ethic. It will be freely be given but there won't be empathy for non-performance. Nomsa*

And

*Okay, my experience is that males are closed up. They're very, very economic with information. But for some reason, I'm beginning to think people are trusting me here because you know, when people tell you confidential information too personal, even the males, they come here with their personal, confidential information, then for me, it's like people are beginning to open up. Maybe they're being drawn by the empathy part... we must find a way to help the person to solve their problems... We sit down and talk to you...if you need a break from work then we look at your leave days and look at how we balance the regulations and your problems... Thandeka*

All participants referred to the rules and regulations on a regular basis. All of them stressed the value of empathy while also mentioning the norms and guidelines that they employ to help them deal with any difficulties they may encounter with their subordinates. Angel (64) stated that to be an efficient leader, she was guided by the rules and regulations of the institution. She was rarely met with a challenge of a subordinate taking advantage, as she would always refer to the rules and regulations. She says in a stern voice:

*The inspection report has guides, rules and regulations, so each one is supposed to follow the rules and regulations...Like I say, I think the rules guiding you on your duties... It helps you...you just follow the rules laid down... that is... what is expected of you? So, if you do that there is no one who is going to complain. Angel*

While most (80%) participants speak to how women are better leaders, the conversation of women having challenges with other women was a common narrative as some participants noted their experiences:

*...then being received even by other females. It's such a very difficult thing to convince, even the other females they want to control you even though they know that now you are*

*on the other side of the hierarchy. They still want to exercise some little power of which comes with age and experience, I guess. Thandeka*

In his article explaining why women don't always support other women, Dr Andrews (2020) lists five reasons. Within the five he lists the *Queen Bee Syndrome* which he says, women in leadership positions behave with more male-specific emotional intelligence abilities, male emotional intelligence is displayed through assertiveness, confidence and toughness. Empathy and interpersonal relationships are two ways that female emotional intelligence is demonstrated. Therefore, he claims, female leaders who act in a more masculine-specific manner tend to spend less time fostering relationships with younger women. Dr Andrews (2020) further states that women in senior positions display this toughness to prove to men that they aren't like other women and that they are capable to lead. Linda recognises the *Queen Bee Syndrome* in her experience:

*Actually, with gender issues and management I learned that even the woman who is in power becomes the 'queen bee'. She wants to be worshipped. She doesn't take advice from anybody. And she doesn't want to assist the other women to progress. She enjoys the company of herself. And the recognition of... It's like she's just there (on top). I do get opposition or conflict from women.*

Lihle expressed that in her experience as Deputy Principal, resistance has majorly come from women than from men, "*From both but most of them females, some (males) have even supported me... where they say I must consider something.*" Participants expressed their disappointment in women not supporting other women. Dr Andrews (2020) also looked into why women don't assist one another at work and made the argument that patriarchal workplace norms devalue women based on rank, privilege, and power. Therefore, cultures that are more masculine assert men as leaders, making it difficult for women to support each other. Nomzamo, who is also trying to understand why women would rather support a man over another woman notes that women eSwatini believe that men are better leaders. She argues that it is because of this belief that women expect men to be in senior positions:

*I think there is this point that is do other women support a woman who is in leadership? because you know, I don't know it's common with let me say Swazi women, I don't know where it comes from, but they believe in supporting a male in leadership than a woman. So, I think it's one of the things you may have to investigate about. I remember, when it's*

*time for elections, you talk to people, and say I want to go for elections. People will say...ah we don't want to elect a woman, because she is going to be proud, you know, and I'm like... where is the pride going to come from? I can't point out the two, but that is what they usually say. And if you go for those elections, and they nominate or when they support, they always elect a man and always support a man. I don't know why...so I think this is something worth investigating. As to say why is it that we do not support another woman? Or is it because of the way we have been brought up to know that uBaba (Dad) is the leader? So even at the workplace most women still believe that it has to be a male in leadership... I don't know...Nomzamo*

Dr Andrews (2020) notes three other reasons for women not supporting each other. The one reason is the 'hard-fought success', whereby women in leadership faced challenges to get to their position and now believe that other women should also work as hard to get there. The other reason Dr Andrews (2020) stated was 'competition for spots' which he says usually happens in an institution where there are few women, women are less motivated to bring others along. Lastly, Dr Andrews (2020) uses the term "power dead-even rule" coined by Pat Heim and colleagues in 'Hardball for Women: Winning at the Game of Business'. Dr. Andrews claims that the power dead-even rule is defined by saying that for women to be in good relationships, power and self-esteem should be equal. This rule affects women's relationships, power, and self-esteem as when the power balance shifts, as it does when a woman assumes a senior role, this can lead to problems and women may talk about her, exclude her from the group. These behaviours, he says, are used to preserve the dead-even power relationships that women are raised with. Dr Andrews states that this subconsciously happens, it is an invisible rule and it's another reason why women sometimes do not support other women. Though not all aspects of Dr Andrews' theory were reflected in participants' expressions in this study, these are worth noting as they may in fact explain some of the tensions and challenges participants make reference to.

### ***Sexual harassment***

Sexual harassment in the workplace is one of the challenges employees face, it negatively affects both male and female, but predominantly females (Yie & Ping, 2021). The conversation on sexual advances came across very early during participant interviews. Maran et al. (2022) defined sexual harassment in the workplace as a form of violence perceived by the victim as shameful, offensive

in terms of their safety and psychological well-being. Some participants in this study relate their stories of sexual advances from older men as they entered into their institution. Sexual advances were either from their seniors or other male counterparts. Grace talks about being blocked from advancing because she would not sleep with her superior, she could only progress after he died:

*My supervisor at the time a male was keen on us having something... let me put it like that, such that when this position had to be upgraded and I had to be recommended for it. It took him time until 'may his soul rest in peace' until he passed on and a new supervisor came in that is when I then got to have the position upgraded...* **Grace**

Two distinct positions of sexual harassment for women holding authority are noted by McLaughlin et al. (2012). They speak of the vulnerable-victim hypothesis and the power-threat model. McLaughlin et al. (2012) state that the vulnerable-victim hypothesis suggests vulnerable workers, such as women with least workplace authority are subject to greater harassment. While the power-threat model suggests that women who threaten men's supremacy are more common targets. Participants stated that normally when women tend to break through the barriers and advance, they are met with commentary from people. Commentary is normally made on how they advanced. Participants state that people will allude to women having used sexual favours in order to gain their positions:

*... I noticed when we women move towards leadership positions, there normally these stories that you are sleeping with so and so I mean, people that you don't even know. You are meeting for the first time. Now there are some stories that you got a position because you had an intimate relationship with so and so, the people that you are not even aware of.* **Thandeka**

And

*...when I introduce myself and say I am (clan name), the then Prime Minister was also (clan name), so they thought it's because I am related... then they started cooking stories that I'm in love with the Prime Minister, I had never even shaken his hand, yet alone talk to him.* **Nomfundo**

Participants who had experienced sexual advances from their male counterparts or superiors stated that they had to be firm and stand their ground in order to be taken seriously. This led to males no

longer pursuing or sexually harassing them. They mention that once their male counterparts and seniors knew their principles, they would then back off.

## **Family-Work Conflict**

### ***Cultural roles***

This second theme on family-work conflict is linked to the first theme, gendered societal expectations. Family-work conflict stems from the foundation of cultural values and beliefs which dictates gendered roles in a family. Family-work conflict occurs when pressure from family and work are imbalanced, and as a result, participation at work is more difficult by virtue of participation in the family role (Weer & Greenhaus 2014). Most Swazi women's roles in a family can bring about challenges at work which push women to work extra hard to maintain their work positions, and these challenges can affect how they positively contribute time to their family.

Societal cultural roles of women in eSwatini include women as care givers in the family. In eSwatini, gender norms place women in leadership roles when it comes to caring for the family and homes, though increasingly, women are successfully holding senior leadership roles, despite the burden of care within the family. Women continue to have challenges with inequality at work and at home, which results in a dilemma of overburdening themselves with duties. All participants spoke about the demands they are faced with by managing their work roles as well as their family roles. Mothers, in comparison to women without children or men with or without children receive fewer recommendations for promotions (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015), reducing their chances of advancing into senior leadership positions.

### ***Work-Family balance***

All (100%) participants have children, and eleven (55%) were either single, divorced or widowed, the rest (45%) were married. There were minor differences in responses between married and unmarried participants. Bhekile (42), who is married and has three children, explained the pressure experienced by mothers, having had to advance in her academic career while having to make time for her various roles in the family, which for her includes being a wife, *"I want to write many more publications now, but I have to balance that with when I get home, I need to be a mom. And I need to be a wife."* Sbonelwe's role as the main care giver in her family is enforced by her husband's move to another country (South Africa) to work, leaving her behind with the children. Given her

position (Vice Chancellor), she has to maintain her job and still look after the children, while her husband is away and focusing solely on his work and career. She mentioned that the demands of travelling back and forth to maintain her family unit was tedious, she had to take a career break in order to focus on her studies and the family:

*...My husband moved to work in South Africa in 2008, so I had to remain behind with the children... it became strenuous for us moving back and forth. Yet I was always interested in pursuing my studies... I then took study leave to pursue my studies and then the whole family had to move to South Africa...when my study leave was over, myself and the children, returned to eSwatini...**Sbonelwe***

Sbonelwe's story indicates how she became the primary care giver and held the responsibility of moving with the children. Despite the fact that society emphasises women's duties as primary carers, they are nonetheless still expected to do well at their paid jobs. All participants noted the importance of being able to have a healthy balance between work and the family:

*I'm someone I think God empowered me with the skill, I know how to separate work and family. When I come to work, I put on a smile, someone cannot tell that I'm going through a tough time, because these people are not part of what is happening at home. **Lihle***

While this balance was considered important, it was not associated with men taking on more responsibilities in the home, but instead, with women doing the work at home and also working harder at work, while men could focus on their work only without having to worry about the home and family life.

Participants spoke of the need to work extra hard in order not to neglect certain aspects of their lives. The challenge of creating time to spend with their children was noted by all participants, as they have to work twice as hard in comparison to men in order to manage juggling their roles, which include spending time with the family and paid work. The experiences of the two women below, Thandi who is single and Bhekile who is married, are very similar. Thandi (38) relates how work can consume a lot of her time, therefore she has to rely on her nanny to help her to raise her child:

*It becomes a challenge but you are able to juggle this and you end up having somehow to neglect your child. Because you have so much work. You have to prove yourself. You have to work extra hard. So now, you don't have time, by the time you get home you're tired and your child there's homework, you know, you have to now rely on the nanny or somebody else, so the child becomes a nanny's child... **Thandi***

And

*...I have to write proposals for funding and all of those things and I write manuscripts for publishing, but I have to find time, when everybody's in bed, wake up very early in the morning when it's still quiet, and then try and catch up on work because I could be in a meeting any day. And if there's an emergency at my child's school, I'd be the first one to be called. So, I have to now drop everything and go. So, I think maybe those are just then the challenges that we navigate as women everywhere. **Bhekile***

Most of the participants spoke about how they have to manage their time, adjusting their own schedules to consider and prioritise the family. Bhekile explains how during her time at school, she adjusted her schedule to include school drop-offs and pick-ups, work, and childcare. She worked diligently to ensure her husband's academic day continued undisturbed, while she had to work through the night to catch up on her paid work. This became her daily routine:

*I had to adjust my schedule while I was there, and I'd have to do school drop off and pickups and he (husband) would just go on with his normal academic day. And I had to schedule my life so that I'm able to drop the kids at school. Go to the lab, work, work, work, work. Be mindful of the time because there's pick up and then come back and pick up the kids, make dinner. Get everybody ready and get them to bed and make sure he's okay. And then when everyone was settled and sleeping, then I'd come back to my academic life and I had to work through the nights sometimes just to catch up on work and then actually that became my, my daily routine. **Bhekile***

Anele expresses how women go beyond work timelines to plan, be constructive, build strategic meetings, empower, delegate, and monitor. She states that being a woman leader requires

balancing work and home responsibilities, changing timelines and adjusting to different time zones. This requires adapting to different sleep patterns and preparing for various tasks.

*Time, as leaders report, we go beyond the timelines that were given to plan, to be constructive and build strategic meetings, to empower, to delegate and monitor. So, all these things must come from you as a leader. So, leadership, being a leader a woman, it entails a lot because even if you lead at work, you also have responsibilities at home. And it means within the territory that you are, you must change your timelines. If you're a woman that wakes up at six, you'll have to wake up at four to plan for everything. And it means you go to sleep when others are already sleeping. Because there are things that you must prepare. **Anele***

Nomsa who also mentions going beyond work timelines and having the responsibility of completing tasks both at home and at work. Nomsa also stated that she barley has time for family:

*Like I mentioned earlier that you have a full load with loads in you're still expected to perform departmental office duties, you find that you end up putting in extra time at the end of the day... In most cases, I find myself leaving the space after, since that time is taken from my family... sometimes you squeeze yourself wanting to take a vacation with your family. Because of the circumstances I've just outlined, no one will act for you. You may not necessarily take as long as you may wish, and so on. **Nomsa***

Elizabeth stated that even though opportunities are available for her advancement, she has to consider the family first. Her husband, who in eSwatini is culturally not expected to be the nurturer within the family, is able to take time off and focus on his career and academic advancement.

*...But also looking at, just the opportunities themselves in terms of advancement, in terms of even employment, in terms of actually going to school, how it becomes so difficult, you know? I'll make an example. With me, I'm doing my PhD on a part-time basis. Because I had to consider my family, to consider my kids I couldn't just up and leave and go to school even though funding I would have gotten just like that. But for my husband it was easy for him to just take some time off work and go away to do his studies. **Elizabeth***

Bhekile poses many questions to the institutions, at the same time, providing suggestions on how institutions can assist with some of the challenges women face. She highlights the impact of

motherhood on women's progress in leadership roles, citing it as a significant obstacle to overcome, in the absence of institutional support. She highlights the dilemma women experience in balancing productivity at work with the added responsibility of parenting.

*Why can't we even have a day-care nursery on campus? Why don't we have one? Because I could come to work drop my kid off at that nursery and I'm closer and rather than me thinking about child a baby, traveling outside and going to pick up. Sometimes they will say oh, you have that breastfeeding hour, but that means I have to break off work early and leave and that time when I do that my colleague is progressing. If we had were given a deadline by our supervisor, for example, they will submit it earlier, so why can't we enable our workplaces to be conscious of all these things, and to support the women then we won't ever be complaining about fewer women, how should they even get there? Because they say in academia for example, you have to have this many publications bla bla bla you should have done this. When with all the responsibilities? So actually, what they are doing is they are telling you that the male will get it before you. Can you imagine maybe people who started PhD with me have more publications than I have. I mean if they are male. Because when do I sit down a publication? When I'm cooking? When?*

**Bhekile**

Participants who were married made the common claim that men would easily take time off to advance their careers. Despite having responsibilities like being the family's primary carer, Angel describes how her husband stepped up to take on the role of nurturer and became the main carer while she had to travel and be away for school. She stated that her husband's major worries were for her safety when she commuted between home for school:

*Initially, he (husband) had a problem that I was going to study away, but really his main concern was about my safety on how I will travel, will I not get raped or hurt in anyway? ... and it was tough, having to travel back and forth for three years while doing my studies. Their dad had to take care of them while I was away. Angel*

Angel's experience differed from that of most married participants, as they share experiences of having to carry the burden of caregiving by themselves. Participants who are single, who were previously married, or who never married before, view marriage as a disadvantage and mention that being single is an advantage at times. Linda says, "I think probably it was the best thing that

*has happened to me, to make decisions without consulting, in terms of not having a husband”.* Thandi who is a single parent, has never been married, points to how advancing to a senior position without being married is an advantage as she doesn't have to get permission for going to further her studies or she is not dictated to by a man as to how to perform her duties at work, by her husband not allowing her to stay longer hours at work or going on work trips. Kunene's (2020) case study in eSwatini, found that women who were single (who were never married, widowed or separated) reported to be more empowered in decision-making in comparison to women who were married. Kunene's (2020) study further revealed that single women in eSwatini have more control over their income in comparison to married women. Thandi, in this study, also pointed out that as much as there are advantages of being unmarried, such as making her own decisions on advancing academically or travelling for work commitments, there were also disadvantages to being a single parent and having to manage the logistics of child care:

*...in terms of advancements because I don't need to be, you know, seeking counsel from somebody else. And if they say, no, I can't go to school. I can't do this. I can't do that. But also, there's a flip side to it to say you're a single parent, you need to work... I have to go to France who stays with my child when I'm gone, you know, now I must ask for assistance from relatives and family members to try and help me... you know, I'm not there to help him out with some of his work. **Thandi***

Marriage, as shown in this study, impacted women differently, where for some being married was advantageous and for others it was considered to be a disadvantage. These narratives are informed by the particular cultures that shape women's experiences and realities, and therefore, their experiences within organisations.

Single mothers are a socially and economically vulnerable group, and are reported to have poor physical and mental health status relative to parents living as couples (Kim & Kim, 2020). Majority (55%) of participants in this study stated that they were single. As such, it was expected that the views and experiences of single mothers would dominate. Participants specifically pointed out that they were single mothers, as to suggest their responsibilities are more:

*It was hard because, as a single parent, taking care of the kids, taking care of my schoolwork. It was tough. I remember one time that my son came to me very late, asking*

*for help in some English work, and I was like studying for a test the next day. And I was like, angry because I told him that you should have come earlier. Now I'm concentrating. And here you come, you want me to stop studying and concentrate on your work, which you would have asked for help earlier than this. Then I didn't notice he went outside. He was crying along the road... But those are the experiences it's not easy to be a parent and study at the same time, especially if you're a single parent because you are playing the role of both mother, father. **Nomzamo***

In single-parent households, the mother is more likely to be the sole provider, even when children have a living father. These women assume dual roles within their households, these include, daily running and upkeep of the household, as well as earning an income to support the family (Mohamed, 2021). As a single parent, Grace expressed understanding the importance of separating work and family, but also stated the need to give both attention. She stated that as a single parent she also assumes the role of being a father, which further adds to the roles that she plays as an individual:

*...I think also being a woman in these positions, you also have to play your roles at home. Even though I'm not married I have a son and I'm a single mother. So, at times it called for me... I had to balance, because when you are in leadership you also have to have that emotional intelligence, to balance things that when you have problems back home don't come and show that attitude here (at work) ...as a single mother you are also a father. There are things that you are juggling and grappling with at home. Then you come here, you have to receive people you have to present, you have to lead people. **Grace***

Two of the participants who were single and had older children who were now in university stated that they no longer have tremendous family-work conflict as their children are no longer in their care. However, they still mention that, although their children are independent, they are still overburdened by work responsibilities which hinder their own educational advancement:

*...My son is in Taiwan (University), the only conflict is just that I couldn't do my own personal work, because I do my PhD in the evening. So, you come home exhausted I couldn't do anything for almost a whole year towards my thesis. It had to come to a stop so that I focus on this (new job position) ... because I had to come to the office even on weekends to work on some of the issues. **Thandeka***

And

*...And then in 2011, I enrolled for my Master's degree in curriculum studies. So that is how far but I am still hoping that I am going to do my PhD. It's just that there's no time. This position I'm holding has a lot of challenges and duties and expectations.* **Nomcebo**

### ***Career breaks and the inequitable division of labour***

A career break is time out of employment due to specific reasons. Traditional reasons for women include taking care of the children or for their professional advancement, such as pursuing further studies (Gwala, 2016). Due to being overburdened, women are forced to take career breaks to either advance their education or take maternity leave and look after the family, thereby impacting their ability to advance as fast as their male counterparts (Bachmann & Gatermann, 2017). Policy measures have increasingly pursued support for equal distribution of childcare tasks between mothers and fathers in recent years, however, it is still mostly women who interrupt their careers to care for children (Bachmann & Gatermann, 2017). Bhekile explains how she takes career breaks to take care of the children and family responsibilities, therefore, limiting her productivity at work, in comparison to her male counterparts:

*I've had to work prior that, just as a researcher here, but you find that just getting there, you have to work and get breaks to take care of children, take on family responsibilities, and then that just sort of drags your productivity, which is lower than your male counterpart.* **Bhekile**

Grace explains the impact of being a single parent and advancing in her academic career. She mentioned how being a parent delayed her academic growth, as she had to take breaks from her studies to attend to her role as a mother. She also mentions the burden of having no financial support and having to fund her own studies, which also caused a delay in her career:

*...but I graduated after three years, that was supposed to be a two-year program, unfortunately, because I was paying for myself and also the problems being a single parent, you know, at times, just have to do coursework and then just take a break and then start, so that's how I then I finished in 2020. I graduated in 2020.* **Grace**

Bachmann and Gatermann (2017) mention the fact that both men and women are changing and unifying their employment behaviours. It still appears that women feel more pressure to take on household duties than men do. These duties include looking after the kids and taking care of the household. According to the participants, men are less likely to be responsible for raising children, therefore it is easier for them to take time off of work to improve academically, whereas women must take care of the family. Elizabeth shares her experience of how she had to pursue her studies part-time and still prioritise the family. Yet, she says, it is easier for her husband to take time off and focus on his academic advancement:

*I'm doing my PhD on a part time basis... because I had to consider my family, I had to consider my kids, I couldn't just up and leave and go to school even though funding I would have gotten just like that. But for my husband it was easy for him to just take some time off work, go and do his studies... And your life kind of comes to a stop, to then now look at this whole thing...but your decision making you need to factor all these things.*

**Elizabeth**

Garcia and Tomlinson (2020) state that men's hours on household labour in dual-earning or female breadwinning households rarely exceed those of their partners. Whereby women, more persistently, are expected to undertake more time-inflexible routine activities. Bhekile made a comparison between herself and her husband, pertaining to how they deal with work and home responsibilities. She mentioned that the role of caregiver falls onto her even when her child is sick or the family has an issue. She talks about the fact that she is responsible for handling family issues, while her husband is able to put aside family issues and continue with his prior engagements such as his academic activities:

*When I compare myself and my husband, you know, when he is blocking time to do a particular thing. He just focuses on that. And that's it. So, he can't be bothered when the child is sick, saying that you should take care of that. He wouldn't be bothered when whatever other crisis in the family comes up. You have to take care of that. Every time my husband is engaged in any other academic activity, he is focused solely on that, but I can't do that.*

Waddell et al. (2021) stated that the effects of Covid-19 highlighted the inequitable divisions of labour in the home. They stated how the confinement of people within the home due to the covid-

19 lockdown further emphasised inequalities in gendered roles, stating that parenting and household work was reserved for women, whereas men engaged in more paid work and personal time. Consequently, it can be said that women have more relationship issues and lower levels of relationship satisfaction due to the bigger and more unfair share of parenting and housework. Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins' (2004) study suggested that performing larger amounts of traditionally female tasks is associated with more mental health issues including depression, among women. Seedat and Rondon (2021) also include physical and emotional stress, depression and anxiety as the outcomes of inequitable household roles. These studies show that the inequitable division of labour within the home not only impacts women's studies and career progress, but their emotional and physical well-being.

A career break that most certainly affected all participants is maternity leave. Nyathi (2021) identified that women in eSwatini are not given equal opportunity to employment, he mentions that women are given temporary positions and that they are seen as non-pensionable due to their reproductive roles. Low and Sanchez-Marcos (2015) explain how policies have advocated for women to take paid leave, yet, labour markets assume women to be less productive, which has led to an increase in the wage gap inequality between men and women. Elizabeth explains how people will position women as privileged by wanting to take career breaks for maternity leave. Yet, women who choose motherhood are faced with extra responsibilities of family, therefore making it hard for them to take on more work after hours:

*...some people will tell you that you know you females still want maternity leave. You want to knock off at five o'clock. You cannot work after hours, because you have to go supervise the kids and homework and stuff like that cook and whatnot take care of your family after hours. **Elizabeth***

### ***Mom guilt***

The strain of having to fulfil dual responsibilities of being a mother and succeeding at work, creates an imbalance that for some mothers, is associated with mom guilt. Constantinou et al. (2021) state that social constructs contribute to encouraging maternal guilt in women who do not follow traditional roles of motherhood. It is clear, from earlier discussions that participants don't want their nannies to take on too much of their parenting roles. They still want to be present in their children's lives, to help them with their homework and social or school activities. Nomzamo, noted

earlier in this chapter, narrates how her son returned home and asked for assistance from her with his school work and instead she scolded him and sent him away as she was busy with her own school work. She relates this story to outline the pressures that women are faced with while balancing their roles and the emotional impact it has on not only mothers, but their children too as she notes, “*He was crying along the road... But those are the experiences, it's not easy to be a parent and study at the same time*”. Bhokile recalled how being away from her children to advance in her education was difficult, “*by then I had three children, yeah, it was difficult to leave all of them and for that many years.*” Mom guilt is noted as a serious challenge amongst the participants, as they also mentioned how they have to work constantly to bridge the emotional gap between themselves and their children, especially if they have been away to advance their education:

*After the first semester, I came back to fetch her and everybody was saying no ways. No ways you can't take her, I can't take her with me. So, she stayed with my younger sister for those five years and I've been trying to make up ever since. I've been trying to make up ever since but there is that spot in her heart that is reserved for my sister. I can't reach it. And after all these years I can't.* **Thoko**

And

*I tried to then bond with my son because during the week, you have back-to-back meetings the whole day. You have to attend a board meeting in the evening. So, you probably get home around 9/10, all you want to do is to take a shower and sleep... So probably that weekend, when you then get to spend time with him(son) get to catch up. But even then, you have a proposal you have a paper to write, you know there's so much that you need to do but you just find a way of making it work.* **Thandi**

The emotional burden of not being there for their children due to the need to advance in their careers, also heightened participants' need to be supported by their spouses. Participants stated that having the support made it easier as they worked towards advancing in their studies and at work.

### *Support system from family*

Participants' support systems included their faith in God, church, and family. Others included their formal and informal mentors. In this section we focus on support from family and discuss the other forms of support in a later section. Nothando and Nomfundo (below) refer to the support they received from their husbands and children:

*Family wise, I've received tremendous support from my husband, he is actually the alarm clock for me, because now I am tired. I've been in this for quite some time. So, I can really feel the fatigue, you know, so even my children they support me, I wake up my daughter.*

**Nothando**

And

*The family support... my husband is another person I bounce my ideas off and sometimes I go to him and he gives me stern responses...(chuckles) he loves me anyway. So, there are things I am comfortable with sharing with him because I know he will give me an honest opinion, that is one of the things that has helped me overcome barriers and challenges.* **Nomfundo**

Some participants who were married pointed out that their partners supported their journeys in advancing in their education and at work, although some participants also noted how their husbands' support would be there verbally but not in practice:

*...my husband was supporting mine, but he also was going to do his Master's. But then you find that when we are now actually doing the support is there verbally but when we are actually physically now doing the thing. You sort of back to your default responsibilities, as society defines them.* **Bhekile**

And

*He pretended as if he was with me, in that, but I told him that I want to pursue my studies in another university... When I was also supposed to graduate in 2020 due to COVID things that didn't come into place, so I graduated in 2021. So, when that came, he never congratulated me, things turned to for the worst when I occupied this position. He said I'm arrogant... and he said, I'm not the people you are leading, accusing me of not paying*

*attention. Just silly things which did not add up until he felt it was time to go, I never initiated the divorce. **Lihle***

Lihle narrates her story of how her husband supported her journey in obtaining a doctorate, but after she graduated, he had a negative attitude towards her which caused a lot of conflict between them, finally leading to a divorce. She spoke of him making subtle comments such as “*I’m not the people you are leading*”. She further stated how living in a patriarchal society caused her husband to be uneasy when she progressed professionally, “*The only challenge I faced is that we're living in a male dominated society, female wise, when each time I advanced myself, you could see that made my husband uncomfortable*”. Elizabeth also relates her challenges with her husband’s expectation of her to leave her leadership role at work and enter into a submissive role at home:

*...You will have your partner who would not understand that you are in leadership you will have extra responsibilities and meetings after hours, that expect you to fulfil your duties. And then there's also the aspect where women in leadership you will always have to sort of like belittle yourself, or is it like that, where they always tell you that your directorship ends at the gate at the university. Once you step out of the gate, you are no longer director. So, you need to come back home and be submissive... **Elizabeth***

This study noted how all married women exercised their agency and autonomy by putting themselves first, advancing both academically and at work, regardless of the resistance they received from home, although in some cases it was at the cost of their relationships. Before she graduated, Lihle recalled obtaining her PhD and a senior position at work. She said that aside from her husband, everyone congratulated her. Lihle had bad recollections of her progressing because her husband had criticised her for doing well in school and advancing at work. Advancing and excelling in her career eventually led to conflict and divorce from her spouse:

*...Before I graduated... when I got the position... eish again... people were like congratulating me left and right, I don’t remember him congratulating me, until when he said one time when we were going to work. He said I am arrogant...I said where is that coming from? He said I am not the people you are leading. He would be angry over nothing accusing me of not paying attention. Just angry over silly things which just did not add up. Until he felt it was time to go, I never initiated the divorce, but he did. **Lihle***

Gcebile further explains how exercising agency and autonomy and putting herself first, brought about negative experiences as she had lack of family support. Gcebile discusses how difficult it is for married women to continue their education. She claimed that her in-laws' lack of support led to fears, which had an impact on both her and her marriage:

*When I obtained it (MA), then I applied for this post, I must say it has not been easy as a married woman, because your in-laws do not support you pursuing your education. There are those insecurities. So, it has affected me much, though I cannot explain but it has affected me much. It even affected my marriage. But I did not stop. **Gcebile***

Elizabeth talked about the difficulties she has with her in-laws, stating that she is unable to speak during family meetings, even when she may have a solution to the difficulties her in-laws may be experiencing at the time. Even though she may be an expert on the subject they are challenged with, she may not speak:

*Some family structures where you will not even have a voice, where you do have a solution for whatever problem they are facing, like with your in laws, but you do not have a voice. A wife doesn't speak during family meetings and all that, and then you're looking, there's my education, there's my expertise going to waste. I can help these people out, they just need to go from abcd, but because I'm not allowed, you know, that's it. Yes. And should you know like, you will not be a leader. You know, where your in-laws are concerned.*

**Elizabeth**

Elizabeth's experience points to the submissive nature and respect that is expected from women in eSwatini. Women are not meant to have a voice in family meetings, as they are seen as 'children'. Despite all her work experience and problem-solving abilities, she mentioned how difficult it is to contribute to family meetings as she has to be submissive.

### **Barriers and challenges to women's advancement and effective leadership**

This section will describe the factors impacting women's ability to advance and lead effectively in their varying institutions. The following factors are highlighted: procedures for promotion and advancement; isolation; lack of financial and professional support; gender socialisation; gender, work, and self-esteem

### Procedures for promotions and advancement

Participants also highlighted issues with the promotion processes and criteria, highlighting a lack of transparency in the promotions and appointment procedures within some of the academic institutions. Nomfundo explains the various steps involved in applying for inspectorate jobs, starting with becoming a teacher and progressing to deputy headteacher, headteacher and finally senior inspectorate positions. Even though this is the case, she was fortunate to have managed to skip some junior positions on her 'climb' to her current senior position:

*First of all, a challenge was that say you don't have enough experience. You know, there is a thing here in the ministry that you must go through certain stages. You must be a teacher, teach for so many years, then work in the region you know, if you're promoted from being a teacher, then a head teacher, maybe work in the region before you can come here (Ministry). I went straight. **Nomfundo***

Similarly, Gcebile shares how she also managed to bypass some stages within the institution's hierarchy, by moving directly from being a teacher and skipping the position of deputy to being a head teacher. She further described how she bypassed being an inspector before applying for her current senior position, an experience which led to conflict among her peers:

*I just jumped from being a teacher, to head teacher. So unfortunately, after we were appointed with those who were appointed, they closed it. They went back to wanting a teacher to be deputy, from deputy to head teacher. When this post was advertised, the requirement was a degree and a masters was an added advantage, so I applied. Then I'm here today, but it was not well welcomed with the other inspectors because they thought I should have been an inspector before. **Gcebile***

Nomzamo outlined the procedure towards becoming head of department, stating that promotions to the position of head of department were based on the longest serving member within the department, these positions are internal and are not advertised:

*It's not an advertised post, so it's just an internal promotion, whereby government according to government orders, they just look at your seniority, who came first in this particular department, then you get to be promoted in that way. So, I happen to be the*

*senior one. So that's how I got promoted. So, it's not a post where it's advertised and you have to apply.* **Nomzamo**

Gugu explained that positions such as principal and vice principal are more senior, therefore, such positions are advertised. Unlike positions of head of department, these positions are promotions that occur within the institution:

*The system... which allows people to be promoted to HOD position are internal, it is guided by a general order from the Ministry, from government. Except for these management positions, except for principal and vice principal. One person applies for an advertised job.* **Gugu**

While the participants' narratives above do not highlight experiences of discrimination and inequality in the advancement processes, such inequalities are reported in previous studies. Lubitz (1997) stated that although promotions for minority (women) groups are happening at a greater scale, there is a need for promotion policies to be improved, as most policies lack standardization across departments and universities. Angel refers to how government does not have clear outlined policies on who gets hired for advertised jobs. She says this becomes an issue as biased appointments can be made, *"Otherwise, they can put in anyone they feel they want to kind of put in, our policy is not straightforward."* Thandeka shares similar sentiments regarding how government's appointment policy is not clear and transparent. There are no clear policies in place, therefore, more men are promoted into leadership roles, which prevents women from obtaining those positions. Kalokora and Lekule (2019) state that transparency is a powerful principle in cases related to public administration and human resources within an institution. Thandeka further notes how appointments previously took place without any straightforward guidelines, *"Because previously it's like people were appointed without clear regulations."* She does, however, later refer to the government's systems becoming more transparent, allowing for more women to advance within the workplace. She suggests women to be more ambitious than men towards academic advancement, therefore, making them better candidates to apply for senior positions as they have high level qualifications (PhDs) and experience. She noted how transparency in the advertising of positions in government had allowed for fairness and for more women to apply for such positions:

*I think what has happened is that the systems have become more transparent in terms of appointment. Then females have got that advantage because things are being advertised. Females are very good at going to school. They don't mind going to school. Most females have got masters and PhDs. So, it made them to get into the top position because they had all the qualification, all the experience, I don't know in the past how they used to appoint but because now the systems are transparent, you have to advertise for the senior position. It has helped us to get in otherwise I don't think we would have got the opportunities if it wasn't advertised. **Thandeka***

Thandeka refers to having qualifications and experience as a stepping stone towards her advancement within the institution. She describes how her experience, exposure, and academic qualifications, led to her advancing to her current position as principal:

*Okay for me, it was one, the experience I'd already accumulated. The deputy position experience for six years. Then the other aspect was the qualification. I'm currently doing my PhD on Educational Leadership Management, which is relevant to the position and I think the other aspects that I had an advantage of is, the exposure, especially when participating through this government. **Thandeka***

One participant shared her views on the importance of having experience in lower positions, which leads to maturity in senior positions. Gcebile shared that the experience and maturity that comes with having been in a junior position can have a positive effect on performance in a senior role and in helping one advance to senior positions. She refers to how being a headteacher gave her experience in empathy on how to deal with other headteachers, as a senior:

*I think it helps when you more matured, because the experience and the route that I've taken, like being a head teacher before, I have the experience, I got from the administrative side, the tests... it has helped me to deal with other head teachers because I know what they're going through, when I deal with them. **Gcebile***

Two participants aged 59 and 64 years, also shared how being older and having more experience in their positions allowed their ideas in policy making to be well received amongst their male counterparts:

*Probably because of my maturity, my ideas are taken seriously by my male colleagues because, in age, I'm older than them, because of experience, I've been the longest serving HOD in the college. Nombuso (59)*

And

*I believe, because I have more experience than them. Although, one of the things I don't do is, I don't enforce my opinion on them. I just try to explain why I think it should be like this. And even when they think it shouldn't be like that. I try to accept their opinion, except when I know that no, this is wrong. And then I still try to convince them. Sandra (64)*

Vaughan-Johnston, et al. (2021) state that the majority of nations in the globe are rapidly ageing. These demographic changes are bound to result in older adults holding more positions of authority and influence in communities than ever before. According to the Vaughan-Johnston, et al.'s (2021) study, leaders in Eastern cultures were on average older than those in Western ones. These findings demonstrate how cultural variations affect not only our choices but also impacts important fields like business and politics. Angel (below) argues that age should be taken into account when filling vacant posts, followed by an examination of the person's qualification for the position:

*I personally, I feel...government has to change the general order policy which should say look at the age of the staff in that department. And then you look at the qualifications, if that person qualifies to go into that position. Angel*

### **Isolation in the workplace**

Social isolation is described by Donovan and Blazer (2020) as the low degree of structural or functional quality of interpersonal connections, interpersonal communication, and interpersonal interactions. Most (95%) participants said they experienced isolation when they assumed their positions. Schobin (2022) highlights that the isolation of women in senior positions is higher in countries with higher levels of gender inequality. Schobin (2022) further argued that in modern societies, individuals have fewer children, marry less, and that the divorce scale is higher, therefore increasing isolation which means individuals are lonelier. Schobin (2022) further suggests that isolation within institutions can be reduced through gender equality. Schobin (2022) further suggests that to reduce loneliness, concentrating on increasing funding for programmes that help people during such transitions could be a good place to start. According to Schobin (2020), in

addition to reducing loneliness, policies that promote people's material dependence on kinship and family, their access to education, and gender equality in general should be viewed as win-win initiatives. Lihle who holds the deputy principal position at her institution expressed how isolated she had become as she advanced at work. Lihle narrated that the higher a person advances in the workplace, the more isolated they become:

*“The higher you go the colder it becomes, even those that you thought are your friends. I don't know whether it's because they thought you would never occupy such a position, they feel like they can do better than you, it's okay it's their own interpretation”* **Lihle**

Similar sentiments are shared by Nombuso and Thandeka below:

*Yeh, you do get isolated. Not everyone is happy that you've been promoted. Most cases, you find yourself isolated. But what helped me was reaching out to people try to talk to people, invite people into my office, organise tea so that we come together and have tea together in the office. So that is how I was able to but you still get resistance you still get resistance from others.* **Nombuso**

*It happens naturally then when someone moves up the ladder, you felt like you don't associate much with that individual. I must say it is a very lonely position, but as a leader you try to bring them closer to you find strategies of bringing them closer, you try change the perceptions about leadership.* **Thandeka**

Given that work takes up a significant portion of a person's life, workplace relationships are becoming more and more crucial to both professional and personal success. On this basis, loneliness at work is an unpleasant feeling that results from dissatisfaction with the social connections that already exist there (Jung, et al., 2022). Nombuso believes that people's negative feelings are attached to another person's success. Although she claims that despite all of her efforts, there is still some resistance from her colleagues and she still feels the effects of being in a senior position, she still believes in nurturing other people by offering up her space in order to connect with them. Participants acknowledge isolation and loss of friendships, as people are afraid to socialise with them as they are no longer in the same rank. Two (10%) participants suggested the people who were close to them indicated that their distance was based on fear. Gugu says she is only close to her family now as she had lost her close friends. Thandeka shares similar views.

*Once you are in these positions, a number of friends people you will be close to, just disappear. I think, I don't know whether it's disappearing, but I gathered from some that say, we are now scared because once we get closer, it will be like what will the people say. Most of the people who are closer to you will be your family. **Gugu***

*Then the other challenge that I noticed with myself was the issue of being isolated. One thing I noticed is that people, once you get in leadership, I don't know whether they get scared of you or it's an attitude issue. You get isolated to a certain extent... **Thandeka***

Anele shares that losing some people in life due to being in a leadership role emotionally impacted her, and that loneliness came along as people distanced themselves:

*Being a leader, you are challenged in so many ways. First and foremost. The first surprise when you go into leadership is losing, realizing that even the people that you thought were close to you, now keep a distance and then keeping a distance. Definitely will touch you in a certain way. But and even the behaviour and attitude definitely change towards you and in most cases, I've always advised my colleagues that being in leadership sometimes makes you to feel a bit lonely...**Anele***

Angel was the only one who had a different experience. She described how within the ministry, as inspectors they were all on the same level, therefore, she did not experience isolation as they all had similar tasks to carry. She further shared that she didn't experience any tension within the ministry as each person had their own field of expertise, therefore tension would not occur:

*Personally, I feel in the Ministry I never experienced that, because, you find that you become a unit as senior inspectors. When you go out to schools, you all go out to schools together. There is no isolation that so and so will not go, when it's a panel of inspection we all go. You get there to the school. You go to your department, and each one goes to that. And there is nothing that disturbs you. There is no infighting because you just focus on your field. So, there is no way someone would be fighting. **Angel***

According to D'Oliveira and Persico's (2023) definition, workplace isolation is a two-dimensional psychological concept that arises from employees' perceptions of their isolation from colleagues and their organisation as a whole. It is noteworthy that the majority of participants in the study believed they were alone because of a lack of support from their colleagues. Some participants

suggested that the reasons for isolation was that people tend to move away from people in senior positions as a way of respect:

*But later on, I realised that, it's not as though they don't want to talk to you but there is also some kind of respect. Sbonelwe*

*So, you're on your own because now people either have no choice, they fear you or respect you, but they no longer talk to you. Thandeka*

It is crucial to note that isolation affects people at all levels within institutions, despite the fact that the study focuses on participants in senior positions and their experiences with isolation. According to the study by Jung, et al. (2022) on the impacts of loneliness at work, junior positions may also involve isolation, just as it affects those in more senior positions as shown in this study.

### **Lack of financial and professional support**

All the eSwatini private colleges and universities, where participants were selected from, are subsidized by government. Therefore, most (90%) participants noted challenges related to obtaining resources from government. One of the challenges presented, was that due to lack of governmental funds, institutions are not receiving financial support, affecting their efficacy and functioning. Nomcebo and Elizabeth present the following illustrations of the difficulties they encounter as a result of scarce resources:

*Challenges that we have while trying to exhibit our duties is the lack of support, especially in terms of resources. Sometimes you want to hold a workshop, you'll find that there's no money especially from our government, sometimes there is no transport to take us to the schools (for inspections) or to the place that you want to hold the workshop. And sometimes there's even lack of support from your superiors. You have to explain why this, or sometimes you even want to attend conferences outside the country, but there's no funding. Nomcebo*

*As a government entity we supposed to be fully funded by government... but currently there's no money so we not expanding the way we supposed to be. Elizabeth*

Linda further highlights that even though her institution and students are funded by government, the support offered is not sufficient to meet the institution's financial needs:

*We get funding from the government. Our students are sponsored by the government. But whatever is being given to us, I would say it's about a quarter of what we're supposed to be getting. Linda*

The lack of financial support in these institutions impact women's ability to lead effectively, as the functioning of the institutions is impacted. The challenge relating to access to operational resources further impact women's experiences in the workplace, and potentially furthers stereotypical narratives about women's inability to lead.

### **Gender socialization during childhood**

As children are exposed to norms and values during their socialization process, they gradually assimilate these patterns of thinking and apply them to assess others, select friends and form expectations about them (Solbes-Canales, et al. 2020). Solbes-Canales, et al. (2020) affirm that influences of male and female expectations in society originate from immediate surroundings (primarily, family and school), as well as more remote systems like media and cultural values. They further state that, as younger children continue to acquire social knowledge, they already start applying gender roles. However, as individuals advance and age, there is a noticeable amplification in the severity of this bias. Nombuso suggested that society as whole should examine the gendered socialization of children from an early age. She says both boys and girls should be treated equally, which will inform their behaviour and thinking at a later stage. She mentions the importance of involving her children in decision making from a young age, as a form of getting equal participation from all children, both male and female. She involves all her children, including grandchildren, in decision making even on small matters, so as to make them understand that they are all equally important and have a voice:

*...Unfortunately, probably it's because of the way that we were socialized, it will go back to the way that we were socialised, unfortunately we are being socialized by other women. Which means we need to go back to our drawing board, on the way that we socialize our children. Because if I socialize a female child, I must socialise that female child the same way as the male child. They mustn't know the prestige of being a man, because the problem probably comes with the surprise that, ha, I can be senior and have male as subordinates and females as subordinates and then the arrogance comes in. And yet if it all starts at home that you are important, you are important as a female you have a voice,*

*the socialization has to change. You know I've started doing this I don't even buy a chair, a simple chair without a meeting with all the children and now I've started including the grand children because I want them to participate in decision making from a young age, for trivial things, I don't just buy a chair. But we all come together and make the decision. Go back to our roots and change the way we socialize our children. Nombuso*

Gender beliefs serve as cultural frameworks through which individuals interpret and comprehend the social and professional realms. These beliefs have the potential to shape attitudes and career aspirations, particularly during adolescence (Ramaci et al., 2017). Ramaci et al.'s (2017) study on *gender stereotypes in occupational choice*, found that men tend to view themselves as more self-sufficient in military, scientific-technological, and agrarian occupations compared to women. Additionally, the occupation of parents appears to be a predictive factor of self-efficacy in the selection of careers within a service sector for women. Masters and Barth (2022) mention the theory of circumscription and compromise which suggests that children's perceptions of gender-typical behaviour and roles are influenced by their social experiences. As children mature, they tend to progressively eliminate career options that are considered atypical for their gender. Furthermore, Masters and Barth (2022) cite the social cognitive career theory and expectancy value theory as explanations for academic and occupational interests. They propose that gender differences in academic and occupational interests can be attributed to gender socialization and associated to gender stereotypes. These theories suggest that gender socialization and stereotypes influence individuals' interests by shaping their academic or career self-concept and belief in their own capabilities. Masters and Barth (2022) suggest children's perceptions of their actual professional knowledge and their actual knowledge are two distinct things. Despite the fact that both boys and girls may actually have the same knowledge about certain jobs that are regarded as masculine, boys often believe that they are more knowledgeable than girls in those jobs. This suggests that self-perceived knowledge is influenced by gender stereotypes. Linda's perception is that girls being encouraged to take on certain subjects in school plays a role in the jobs they will enter into. According to her, it is important to provide girls with encouragement to pursue courses and subjects in high school that are predominantly dominated by men in order to bridge the gender inequality gap in career choices:

*...because in the engineering and sciences, the lecturers are all males. Until our girls start from scratch, you know, learning sciences. This starts in Form One (first year in high school). So, we mentor them from there, from Form One, we guide them and mentor them, and when they finish school, you direct to them to apply to these male dominated programs...then will be talking about non-existent gender issues. **Linda***

### **Gender, work, and self-esteem**

Krauss and Orth (2021) state that there is a reciprocal relationship between people's work experiences and their self-esteem, meaning that one can influence the other. The patriarchal mindset among senior leaders, particularly male leaders, has persisted without significant reduction (Hanyane & Ahiante, 2022). Hanyane and Ahiante (2022) state that men employ gender discriminatory behaviours to uphold patriarchal attitudes in order to subordinate women and uphold their dominance in leadership. They further highlight four primary themes that emerged from there that speak to the impact of misogyny on the progress of women in leadership roles. These themes included: scepticism towards women's leadership, diminished self-confidence, psychological distress and depression among female leaders, and decreased ambition among women to attain directorship and top leadership positions (Hanyane & Ahiante, 2022). Gcebile, similarly, argues that women in senior positions often experience self-doubt regarding their abilities. She expressed that she relied on reassurance from her boss to cultivate her self-esteem:

*But I feel women should have the confidence to take up the positions. They don't believe in themselves, like myself, who applied, but when they gave me the position, I thought, am I going to be, okay? Am I going to do things right? But as I say my boss, he built the confidence in me. **Gcebile***

In an article titled '*I want to be a leader, but men are better than women in leadership positions*', al-Mutawa (2020) shares women's perceptions of an ideal women leader in a patriarchal society. The findings suggest that despite ninety three percent (93%) of participants expressing a desire or likelihood to become leaders, they still supported "sexist" stereotypes and perpetuated legitimizing myths, such as women not belonging in the workplace. Within al-Mutawa's (2020) study, the term 'gender-framing' is used to describe how the state promotes women's involvement in the workplace by presenting it within the context of culturally and socially embraced ideals. These ideals include the expectation for women leaders to fulfil responsibilities such as raising children,

prioritizing their families, and adhering to traditional standards of dress and behaviour. When ‘gender-framing’ occurs, women leaders are positioned within these boundaries, they cease to be viewed as self-centred or a rebellious individual, but rather become a symbol of a dignified and devoted woman. Men, on the other hand, are encouraged to focus on their work and careers, and are celebrated for doing so. This can negatively impact women’s self-esteem in the workplace (Tabassum et al., 2021). Sandra also conveyed the belief that many women struggle with low self-esteem. To address the issue, she proposed that women prioritize themselves as a primary focus in their lives and proactively address their own needs before tending to the needs of the family:

*I think a lot of women have a low self-esteem. They believe that because I'm a woman, I'm less a human being than a man and that alone spells failure. Because once you believe that, you are not up to the level. So, I think one of the things that women need to do, is to see themselves as human beings, to see themselves as able, to push their interest and not allow anything... because I think, a lot of women believe, oh, if I don't have a man in my life, then I cannot achieve, or if my husband doesn't support... you are first of all human being before you are a wife and mother. And so, you should live your life. Also, you should push your interest, you should try be what you want to be. **Sandra***

In comparison to men, women are said to exhibit lower levels of optimism regarding their chances of achieving a leadership position and anticipate encountering more challenges once they attain such positions. These factors contribute to doubts about their leadership capabilities (Rink et al. 2019). Nomfundo shares her observation that some women assume certain positions and anticipate preferential treatment based on their gender, highlighting such behaviour as a hinderance towards their advancement.

*So, first of all, you need to address that perception that says don't come into any space and flag the fact that I am a woman, you know, I should be given preference. I can't have that negative attitude, low self-esteem and so forth. No, because it will make you not go forward. **Nomfundo***

Breaking through the glass ceiling does not ensure the elimination of gendered obstacles for women. Instead, women who achieve positions of leadership frequently face additional stereotypes specific to leadership, based on their gender, qualities, and ability to lead effectively (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) suggest these challenges

further exemplify the societal tendency to associate leadership with masculine attributes, often resulting in unfavourable perceptions of female leaders who do not conform to masculine attributes. Women have had to find ways to respond to the status quo in the workplace by exhibiting masculine traits. Rink et al. (2019) argue that men tend to demonstrate a preference for promoting individuals who possess similar traits and characteristics to men. Rink et al. (2019) further argues that it is both men and women generally support the idea that successful leaders should exhibit traits typically associated with masculinity, commonly known as the “think-manager think-male” association. While gender is clearly highlighted as impacting women’s experiences in this study, Sbonelwe (below) argues for the contrary.

*Do not be so mindful of gender, but be mindful of the position, the duty, the job description, the expectation. By so doing then you earn their respect even though you are a woman. Recognise their position, don't over step your boundaries. Sbonelwe*

Sbonelwe proposes that women should not focus on gender, but instead concentrate on their position and strive for high performance. By doing so, they will earn recognition and respect as leaders, regardless of gender.

### **Promoting women’s advancement and effective leadership**

Participants were asked about their suggestions for necessary changes to facilitate smoother navigation of their work and to reduce challenges they face as leaders. The suggestions are presented as follows over the next few sections: mentorship; empowerment, delegation and teamwork; and being knowledgeable and passionate.

#### **Mentorship**

Effective mentorship plays a pivotal role in the success and development of academics and academic leaders. Mentors provide invaluable guidance, support and expertise to mentees, helping them achieve their goals and navigate their careers (Alkatani, 2021). Most of the participants in this study spoke of how they advanced to senior positions without any clear guidance and formal mentorship programs within their institutions. Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) outline the importance of mentorship as a developmental strategy and an affirmative action tool that can be used to support and assist women and disadvantaged groups. Thandeka explains the struggle women encounter of advancing to senior positions without proper guidance, she further expresses

that there is no training for women who attain leadership positions and they have to rely on experience only:

*I think other things that I noticed, that is, as a woman in leadership, you struggle with is, we just get appointed there is no preparation or training. Now you have to find your way of surviving the whole thing because I mean, you recruited as a teacher then you become a lecturer from that channel and move into vice but I mean, everything's based on experience. No, there is no theoretical background. **Thandeka***

Thandeka continues by stating that not having a mentor made it difficult for her to understand how to write reports and use specific vocabulary when addressing requests to the Principal's Secretary when she took the post on her own:

*For me that was the biggest challenge because I had to learn to write that language of asking for things from the PS's office every day. But now I'm used to the procedures. Now I'm learning, but the challenge is that there was nobody mentoring you into all those things. **Thandeka***

Mentoring encompasses both official and informal connections. Informal mentorships frequently arise on their own without the assistance of institutional rules (Owusu- Agyeman, 2022.) Anele highlights the importance of learning through observations, as a way of teaching yourself about the position you are taking on. Though she acknowledges that there is power in observing, she notes that training is just as powerful:

*You learn not because you ask to learn, when people do, you learn. You learn how people do things, and from observing is the most powerful way of learning. And, you know, most people believe training is also another very powerful structure that we have. Indeed, it is. **Anele***

While some of the participants spoke about a lack of mentorship programmes, Sandra shared how she has taken it upon herself to offering mentoring to some of her junior colleagues, although it is not on an official capacity:

*...maybe informal, because like, I mentor some of my colleagues, but not official, I mean it's not that there's any program. Of course, as a senior person, you're supposed to*

*encourage those people who are below you, you need to come up. So, I have a kind of relationship where I encourage them either formally or informally.* **Sandra**

Some organisations have introduced a range of support mechanisms to help women advance in the workplace over the years, one of these mechanisms is implementation of mentorship programmes (Lantz-Deaton et al. 2018). Nomsa refers to a workshop and training that takes place, which outlines expectations from the institution on office bearers, heads of departments and deans. However, she notes that the training took place once-off and no other refresher training sessions were offered thereafter:

*Yes. With new office bearers, head of departments, Dean's and so on, appointed. There is a workshop, where they are trained on their expectations, their presentations from the different stakeholders in the institution on what is expected of them how they're supposed to conduct themselves, how they're supposed to perform certain tasks. So, there is mentorship, even though it's a once off, then you allowed to run for the whole term, without maybe updates and refresher trainings and seminars of some sort.* **Nomsa**

Most (75%) participants said that no official mentorship existed and, six (30%) of the twenty participants said they would seek assistance from those who had previously been in a senior position within the institution:

*But I would say, you then tap into the people closest to you within the faculty, who may have held that same position before because out those and fortunately for me, I have a dean who is very supportive, He's very supportive. I think I owe my performance in the first term to his patience and his temperament.* **Nomsa**

*What has really helped me was looking for mentors that are also females, who have been in the senior positions before me. Those are the people that really helped mentor me in this position, they were from within the institution.* **Nomzamo**

Four (20%) participants stated that they received indirect mentorship from their male seniors and received support from the institution:

*... a very respectful man. And I will call him my mentor. You know the way he was so fatherly, and he always made us want to come to work even though you tend to feel like I*

*do not want to come to it but because of his character and the way he was. He was good with everyone and he was big on team work. **Grace***

*I think the way my boss treats me, I feel like he is mentoring me because he's allowing me to explore. When I have ideas, I communicate them with him and he welcomes them. Even now, I have a proposal, I suggested an idea and he took it in with both hands.*

**Gcebile**

*I was really supported by the administration of this college though it was male dominated for many, many years, but it's only now that we have a principal who is a female for the first time ever since I came here. **Nothando***

Eight (40%) participants indicated that they received mentorship from outside of their institutions:

*I was struggling in any way, then the other thing because there was this gap of training and there is no mentorship into the position. Then what has helped me a lot because you really struggle with trying to figure out how to handle things in the office. What I did, I just created a WhatsApp group for my colleagues who are in other tertiary, with the same agenda, so that we share information... Then I also I had to find myself a mentor, I asked somebody to assist me at X (another higher learning institution), with trying to adapt into the system. So, I got that mentor for myself, a private mentor to assist me with my challenges... it's a male, because they are very few females of course. So, I had to ask somebody who is more experienced at professor level. Just to develop the confidence aspect. **Thandeka***

Only one of the twenty participants, Sbonelwe, indicated that her institution runs official mentorship programs and that each senior member had a responsibility to mentor their subordinates:

*I had mentorship from the officer who was in this position on a part time basis, but he is not local he is in the US. So, he was only here for two weeks for an induction then he left after that we were always communicating. This was an official mentorship program because we had to go through an induction program and I had to consult him... I have to officially mentor my subordinates. **Sbonelwe***

The above extracts highlight participants' varying experiences regarding the accessibility of mentorship opportunities. While some had access to such opportunities though they weren't sufficient, others did not have access to such support in their roles. Based on their own experiences, some participants took it upon themselves to offer mentorship to others. When asked if their preference was to mentor a male or female, all (100%) participants said they would mentor both, this was on basis that each person should have equal opportunity to learn and grow. A few examples are presented below:

*I don't think the mentorship should be because you're a woman or man. I think mentorship should be for everybody. Because we are all doing the same job there is no different job or duties for a man or woman. We are all academics. So, for me, the mentorship should be for every one of us. Not only because you are a woman. **Sandra***

*I would mentor both... I believe in equality. **Gcebile***

*I mentor almost everyone that comes to mind, I mentor them in terms of the content that they have to teach, I mentor them, behaviour must be and I always think of the succession line whoever is going to take after me must be clear, know the expectations, this is how things are done. **Nombuso***

Alkhatnai (2021) states that in some cultural contexts, individual differences can contribute to bias and dominance in mentoring relationships. Cultural factors such as power dynamics, social hierarchies and implicit biases can influence the interaction between mentors and mentees. For Nombuso, being mentored by men was difficult and she found that male mentors would not provide guidance, but give instructions instead “...*It was difficult to be mentored by men, I mean... what I noted was that they just demand... like go and write a minute and no one really says this is how a minute is written.*” Angel's case was different in that she was not given an opportunity to mentor anyone as her position doesn't allow her to know who will take over:

*No, you know why you are never given that opportunity (to mentor someone) because you don't know who's going to replace you. When your time comes for retirement, you pack your bags you go and then the ministry will then go through interview. Who they will then come up with, someone who you don't know. It could be someone when you feel or did*

*not qualify to have that position because of observations you made during your time with that individual... Angel*

### **Empowerment, delegation, and team work**

Empowerment can be defined as the act of distributing power. It entails a leader giving people the power and skills to act independently (Sharma & Mehta, 2021). Latu et al. (2019) propose that having women in leadership positions who are visible and serve as role models can provide other women who encounter leadership obstacles with the chance to observe and emulate empowering behaviours. Empowering employees with leadership skills significantly boosts motivation, performance, and commitment to the organization (Jarsin et al., 2020). Anele further goes on to say that women leaders not only have the role to perform their own duties, but also have the responsibility to empower other women. She states that women leaders should give other women opportunities to grow, they should delegate tasks and roles in order for them to learn:

*I've learned from other leaders that if you have a maid as a woman in the house, that woman must not end up as a maid. Empower them they must leave you better than who they were when they joined you or they become maids. The same applies, I have an administrator, a secretary and I work with two administrators as head of academics and they are overseeing the other faculties. And if I can work with them to come up with a report, then they must know how to develop my report, even if I'm on the sick bed. If someone new comes in they can orient that person within full understanding. Anele*

The majority of participants emphasized the importance of delegating work in leadership positions. Empowering employees enhances their personal sense of control and fosters greater work engagement, leading to positive managerial and organizational outcomes (Jarsin et al., 2020). Participants in the study viewed delegation of tasks by leaders as a manifestation of teamwork that effectively reduced the overall workload. Thandeka, Sbonelwe, and Lihle share their views below:

*I strongly believe as a leader I have to distribute leadership, I can never know it all. We should be flexible enough as leaders to say you provide, you know in meetings people must talk freely, don't judge. I mean, they should be protected. Don't personalize, allow them to even criticize you because you can never see your shortfalls. Thandeka*

*There's a need for time management and delegation of duties. What we tend to do at times is when we realise that this is not done properly then we want to do it ourselves. Whereas, we delegate and then monitor the person that we have delegated to, just to ensure that the work is done properly. As well as you stating your position what I mean is your instructions so to say must be very clear. Your co-workers should know this is what Dr Sbonelwe wants, if I bring this, I know for sure it will not go through and I must do this to perfection because this is what she wants. **Sbonelwe***

*I use the team management most of the time. If I feel if there was too much heat in this office. I will ask them, so that we come and discuss the issues. I would also ask individual people, we know each other, this one can help me to sail through and ask a person how would you handle such a situation? They will expand and chat for the better part of the hour. You ask both male and female... it has also helped me. Within the institution even the HODs you ask them, how do you solve this one? Praise the person so that they believe that they are of importance. Even the person who has the most resistance, go after them, take him out of the crowd and deal with him as an individual, tell him you are struggling and ask him for suggestions. **Lihle***

Organisations ought to acknowledge the significance of collaborative work and prioritize strategies that foster and enhance teamwork, ultimately benefiting the organization (Schmutz et al., 2019). Thandeka mentions a lack of team work, and questions whether people choosing to work independently is limited to eSwatini. She stated that individuals prefer to work alone and yet she is of the understanding that team work supports the achievement of goals within an institution:

*Okay for me with the work, is team building, that is very critical. You know, I don't know whether it's us as Swazis or what... people are so used to working independently, as silos. I don't know whether it's a culture of academics, they want to work in their little corner yet we're striving for the same goal. I mean, you tell people, our goal here is that we have quality teaching and learning. It means we must move together. So, I think building that team so that we work collaboratively and understand what this is the goal. **Thandeka***

Effective functioning within the organisation necessitates extensive interaction and communication among its members during various activities (Tohidi, 2011). Women leaders who foster an environment of empowerment exhibit the traits of clear and direct communication

(Sharma & Mehta, 2021). The foundation of team work is in communication, and according to Thandeka, there is a gap for training regarding effective communication, as she says: “*Communication is also very critical. I always think we do need training on how to communicate effectively.*” Nothando argued that leaders should be supported, and more so, female leaders as they are judged more harshly in leadership roles:

*We need to support, fully support a position and whoever is in that position. Be it a man or be it a woman and when it is a woman because the men are looking up for our shortcomings. Let us then support each other when you're in that position. You need support from those you are leading.* **Nothando**

Building relationships within a work environment is crucial for an institution’s productivity. Sandra spoke of how she entered her institution and was met with subordinates who kept their distance. She relates that the woman who had previously held her position would enforce her role as a senior, and therefore, her sub-ordinates distanced themselves from her expecting her to behave in the same way as her predecessor. Sandra states how she had to make a concerted effort to create the relationships:

*I experienced that, I just found out that people don't relate with me, you know, the way they relate with other people. So, I took it upon myself to make sure I greet them, make time to have a conversation with them. And then gradually I think... they've had an experience of one professor that came in, I'm talking about my faculty. She was a woman too and she tried to load it over them, you know, know that she is superior. So, when I came, they decided they will put me in my place, but with time they saw that I'm not that kind of person.* **Sandra**

Accountability compels individuals to adhere to appropriate guidelines for behaviour, while also serving as a mechanism for social control to ensure that behaviour aligns with those guidelines (Stewart et al., 2023). Accountability is very important in leadership and can bring about self-awareness as a leader. Nomfundo put forward that in order for her to critically assess her leadership ability, she relied on a friend who she knows can objectively make comments towards her role and correct her if need be:

*I requested a friend, to be a critical friend and she was not even in a senior position. And I requested her to let me know when I'm wrong, because at times I will be subjective you will be objective, so just tell me. At first, she said she was scared but that's what has helped me address my blind spots. **Nomfundo***

Nomfundo further shares how reflecting on situations and not rushing to resolve an issue can assist leaders to overcome challenges. She mentions that one's perception varies from another, therefore, it is important to reflect and understand the different perspectives before concluding on issues:

*You say okay let me give this time to gel, you tell yourself that let me go and reflect, maybe another opportunity will present itself, where I will come from a different perspective and things will change. So that has also helped in overcoming barriers. Obviously don't leave it for a long time, but consciously using time to address challenges that will be there. Because it's not everything that has to happen now and your own way. People don't see things the same as you I mean as you with the same way as you do. People have their own pressures and so forth if you give them time. **Nomfundo***

Another aspect participants brought up as a way to deal with the challenges women in leadership face is attitudinal changes. Nothando stated that women who are in senior positions should be open minded and accept advise from other members, leaders should consider other individuals' opinions:

*Also, as a leader, a woman in high position. You also must not have that attitude to say, I am always right, create a room for criticism. Create a room for someone to come in tell you this is not going right please consider a B and consider that. Don't say this is what I've decided on, your decision might not be the right one at the maybe that moment. So, you need to also be open minded to issues that will be brought up by other individuals.*

**Nothando**

Nothando emphasizes the importance of transparency among women in leadership roles. By openly addressing issues, they can earn the trust and confidence of those they lead, ultimately motivating their subordinates to support and assist them:

*Our attitude is women in leadership. It should not create a barrier between us and the people that we are leading, but it should encourage openness to issues and once you are*

*open people will trust your capability that you know position. But if you are always like, what I say is right, and when things are going amiss, people say that one knows everything and they will not help you. They will not support you. **Nothando***

Anele highlights the significance of having principles as a leader, particularly as a woman in a leadership position. She explains that adhering to her principles has helped her navigate any challenges she has faced, ultimately earning her respect from others:

*I stick to my procedures and principles that are there in life. And I think through that I've appreciated that I have earned respect and respect that they also attest and confidently say that you know what we respect about you is that you are fair. You don't have, you know, categories when it comes to how you handle situations challenges. **Anele***

Sbonelwe adds the following:

*Stick to being professional, stick to what is in your profession, don't bring in any garbage from outside, when dealing with males you work with them as professionals. If there's an expectation it must be within the profession. **Sbonelwe***

According to Sbonelwe's suggestion above, women should treat men in a professional manner. It is not clear whether Sbonelwe means in the same way that one would treat women in the workplace, or whether she suggests that men should be treated differently than women, by specifying 'males' in her statement. What is clear in her assertion is that women should not bring their external issues to work.

### **Being knowledgeable and passionate**

A great number of women are obtaining doctoral degrees and securing positions in research or teaching roles at universities, surpassing previous records (Spitzer, 2021). Another suggestion of overcoming the barriers in an institution is to constantly update your knowledge in the particular field and position. Nomfundo states that being knowledgeable in a particular area of work allows people to know your voice and it also allows a leader to grow. She further mentions that engaging in reading has the capacity to broaden one's mind, enabling critical reflection and self-evaluation:

*Try keeping abreast with what is happening in my field, with what's happening. As I said earlier, I publish and it's a lot of work. Keeping abreast helps you address some*

*barriers...you present yourself as... not as someone who wants to show that you know, but you know. So, when you're contributing it's not from an ego or low esteem point of view, it's just purely professional and people realise you know your stuff. It also then helps you reflect on your own short falls. **Nomfundo***

Thandeka shares similar views:

*Reading is also very important try to read then apply yourself into your work, I think it's very critical. Apply yourself into that unworkable condition don't behave like you've never been a lecturer... understand what they're going through and the pressure in everything and try to accommodate, but of course, there has to be boundaries. **Thandeka***

While being self-aware is of great importance, understanding the field and knowing your personal interests is crucial. Nomcebo suggests that being passionate and motivated is important, and helps turn one's focus away from the challenges. She says finding interest in what you do will eliminate some of the uncomfortable experiences in the workplace:

*The only thing that you can do as a person is just being passionate about what you do, just put the challenges aside and continue with your work, otherwise you can just stop functioning if you look at the barriers. You should just be passionate about your job even those days. And you have to motivate yourself what you'd call intrinsic motivation. Otherwise, yeah, I think that's what I can say. being passionate and being able to motivate yourself as a person and being aggressive in terms of doing your work. So that you can achieve the desired results. **Nomcebo***

As shown above, participants viewed being knowledgeable and passionate as important. This is important not only for the leadership position itself and one's ability to fulfil it, but also for shifting perceptions about women's leadership skills – undoing the narrative that suggests that women are less capable of leading than men.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of women in senior leadership positions in higher education institutions eSwatini. The findings highlight the intersections of age and gender in shaping women's experiences, as well as the impact of other factors such as physical appearance and marital status. These factors inform not only how women are perceived in leadership positions, but also their ability to fulfil their roles effectively and the support they receive within such roles.

Culture is a major obstacle to achieving gender equality in eSwatini. Swazi cultural practices still place men as the head of the family, which also translates into the workplace, creating the perception of men as better leaders. These patriarchal practices impact women negatively, making it hard for them to enter and thrive in senior leadership positions. Women are still at a constant battle for job opportunities, while men are still predominantly the ones taking up senior leadership positions. Cultural socialization is a developmental process through which children learn about traditions of culture and attain cultural beliefs and values. Societal expectations and norms dictate how Swazi women should present themselves culturally in eSwatini, and further 'dictates' the fields of work they enter into. This study shows that most participants headed the soft skills departments, while men dominated in and headed the science departments. These findings highlight the persistent gendering of certain career fields and positions eSwatini.

The findings of this study further show the ways in which gender stereotypes influence women's progression within institutions of higher learning eSwatini. The basis of stereotypes formed included gender, age, physical appearance and social standing (marital status) in the community. Younger women, unmarried women, "small" women had different experiences to their older, married, and physically bigger counterparts – highlighting further dimensions of discrimination in the workplace for women.

While married women had better experiences in the workplace than single women, the study found that there were more single and divorced women in the study sample and for some of the divorced women, it was the difficulty of having to manage both work and the family that led to tensions in their marriages. These findings suggest that in order to succeed in their work, women have to deprioritise their family life, while men remain reluctant to contribute more to family life.

The patriarchal culture eSwatini fosters masculine working environments, creating a preference for male leaders. However, other participants in this study argued that empathy is important, and that male leaders often lack this trait, which is important for people in senior leadership positions. This assertion suggests that some participants in fact believed that women were better at leading and problem solving than men. Further findings identified emotional intelligence, reflective abilities, and empathy as crucial professional attributes for academic institution leaders, emphasizing the importance of maintaining principles and separating work from personal matters, without acknowledging the ways in which the professional often intersect with the personal.

Most HEI's in eSwatini are headed by female leaders, demonstrating the progress in addressing the gender gaps in the workplace. However, the cultures within professional spaces remain unchanged, highlighting the pervasiveness of patriarchy in all spheres of social life. With more women taking up senior leadership positions, it is important that the cultures within these institutions change in order for women to succeed in leading these institutions and in order for women to receive more support in their roles.

### **Limitations & Strengths**

Contexts vary and they matter, and although the proposed sample size may be acceptable in a qualitative study, the realities and experiences of women in senior leadership positions may be so varied that one needs to seriously caution against generalizing the findings of this study to women in other geographical, socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. Due to Government easing the Covid-19 restrictions, I conducted face-to-face interviews, as this was a more personal approach and body cues were taken into consideration. Face-to-face interviews allowed me to jot down notes and reflect on these as I did my data analysis and write up. One of the study's strengths was that all participants communicated in English, there was no requirement for translations, which therefore, allowed for the data to be interpreted without losing meaning in participants' narration of their experiences. Another strength in this study is that it was conducted by a female researcher, which allowed for the participants to make reference to topics they thought only other women would understand. As such, it is probable that participants' answers to the questions posed to them would have differed from those provided to a male researcher. Another important limitation in this study was time limitations. Given how pervasive gender inequality is in the workplace, this study would have benefitted from a larger sample size across more institutions.

Finally, this study was exploratory, and therefore very descriptive due to the limited number of studies theorising these experiences eSwatini. Despite these limitations, this study presents valuable insights relating to women's experiences in senior leadership positions, and will make an important contribution towards interventions aimed at shaping and changing cultures within institutions, alongside decreasing the gender gap in terms of appointments and promotions.

### **Proposal for future improvements**

Understanding senior women's experiences in higher education in eSwatini was the aim of this study. As a result, some recommendations for policymaking that can support women's advancement in HEI's were made. These consist of: The critical consciousness theory should be applied by HEI's in the implementation of their institutional and systematic structures of inclusion. The idea can be applied to examine the intersectionality that women in eSwatini's higher education institutions encounter. The study also showed that while there are initiatives to support mentoring, the public sector and HEI's lack the necessary structures, therefore mentorship guidelines must be implemented. This underlines the necessity of appointing managers who ensure that various types of mentoring are taking place within their institutions. The roles HEI's need to play in the larger community is to adopt the policies of being the change agents within communities and advocating for implementation of the policies put forward for woman's advancement. HEI's should center themselves as the advocates of institutions at large that communicate with patriarchal structures to bring about change. Due to numerous funding shortages brought on by government funding, HEI's ought to establish a department dedicated solely to funding and collaborating with foreign organizations in order to allocate funds for programs like mentoring and compensating retired senior members to serve as consultants in HEI's. Lastly, Retirement policies must enable women leaders to return to their institutions and engage with other women in formal mentorship programs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to understand senior women's experiences in higher education eSwatini and while it makes a significant contribution to our understanding, there are still avenues to explore. Several ideas revealed in this study require further investigation. These include the extent to which gender shapes leadership styles in varying contexts; the impact of culture on

women's experiences in the workplace; the role of legislation and policy in shaping women's experiences and protecting them from sexual harassment and sexist practices in the workplace, among other issues. The role of mentorship was also highlighted as an important form of support for women in leadership positions, and as such, should be studied further to examine the barriers to mentorship in the workplace and the types of mentorship programmes women would find most effective. These suggestions for the future could aid in the acquisition of knowledge regarding hiring practices and other obstacles that women have faced for many years.

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*Appendix A: Invitation to participate*

**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**



**DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**

**Invitation to participate:**

You are invited to participate in a research project titled '*Women in Senior Leadership Positions: Higher Education in eSwatini*'.

**Who can participate?**

This project seeks to recruit women who are in senior leadership positions, these include: Senior inspectors at Ministry of Education, Heads of Departments/chancellors/vice chancellors/deputy vice chancellors/deans who are currently holding these positions at Higher learning institutions in eSwatini.

**Aim of the study**

The aim of the proposed study is to explore experiences of women in senior leadership positions in higher education institutions and their contributions towards policy-making within these institutions.

**Procedure**

Interviews will be conducted at a venue of your choosing and will last between 45-60 minutes. Please note that these interviews will be recorded using an audio-recording device, and later transcribed and analysed, following which it will be written up as a Masters dissertation, with the possibility to publish in academic journals.

**Ethical considerations**

Any information you share during this study will be kept confidential. All audio-recordings and transcripts will be kept in a password-locked folder and will only be accessible to the researchers involved in this study. Any hardcopies produced including the signed consent forms will be kept in a lockable compartment that only the principal investigator will have access to. For the purposes of reporting, all names will be removed, and pseudonyms will be used to ensure that the data remains anonymous. You have the right to withdraw your participation from this study at any point without any negative consequences. Should you choose to do so, any data you have already provided will be destroyed and will not contribute towards the study.

**Contact details**

Should you be interested in participating in this study or have any questions about this project, please contact the principal investigator, Annette Dlamini at [annettedlamini@gmail.com](mailto:annettedlamini@gmail.com) or on 0761868801, or the supervisor Dr Mandisa Malinga (Psychology,UCT) at [mandisa.malinga@uct.ac.za](mailto:mandisa.malinga@uct.ac.za) or on 021 650 4997. Alternatively, contact Rosalind Adams (Psychology, UCT) at [Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za](mailto:Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za) or on 021 6503417.

YOUR PARTICIPATION WILL BE HIGHLY APPRECIATE

*Appendix B: Consent Form*

**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**



**DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**

**Consent Form**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research project titled '*Women in Senior Positions: Higher Education in eSwatini*'.

**Purpose of the study**

The aim of this study is to explore experiences of women in senior positions in HEIs and their contributions towards policy making within those institutions. Your participation in this study will involve an individual face-to-face interview that is expected to last between 45-60 minutes. Each interview will be recorded using an audio-recording device, and will be later transcribed, analysed and written up as a Masters thesis, and possibly published in an academic journal. publication.

**Ethical considerations**

Any information you share during this study will be kept confidential. All audio- recordings and transcripts will be kept in a password-locked folder and will only be accessible to the researchers involved in this study. Any hardcopies produced including the signed consent forms will be kept in a lockable compartment that only the principal investigator will have access to. For the purposes of reporting, all names and identifiable information will be removed, and pseudonyms will be used

in order to ensure that the data remains anonymous. You have the right to withdraw your participation from this study at any point without any negative consequences. Should you choose to do so, any data you have already provided will be destroyed and will not be used for the study.

### **Benefits and risks**

This study is expected to pose minimal emotional harm to you as the questions focus on your experiences in your workplace. Should you feel distressed at any point as a result of the study, you can inform the researcher who will arrange for you to seek professional help at a facility closest to you. There will be no compensation for participating in this study. However, the researcher will provide lunch for the duration of the interview to make up for the time you have taken. The study has no direct benefits to you, but will contribute to what we know about women in senior leadership positions in higher education. We also hope that you will find useful this opportunity to voice any challenges and frustrations you might be experiencing as women in senior leadership positions.

### **Contact details**

Should you have any questions following this interview, please contact the principal investigator, Annette Dlamini at [annettedlamini@gmail.com](mailto:annettedlamini@gmail.com) or on 0761868801. Alternatively contact the principal's supervisor Dr Mandisa Malinga (Psychology, UCT) at [mandisa.malinga@uct.ac.za](mailto:mandisa.malinga@uct.ac.za) or on 021 650 4997. Or contact Rosalind Adams (Psychology, UCT) at [Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za](mailto:Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za) or on 021 650 3417.

### **Consent**

I ..... confirm that the above study has been explained to me and all questions have been answered by the researcher. I fully understand the implications of my participation and am aware that I can withdraw from this study at any point should I no longer wish to participate. I hereby confirm that I agree to participate in this study and give my consent for the information I share to be used in any publication for this project without the disclosure of any information that will make me identifiable by others.

Signature..... Date.....

(Participant)

I also give my consent to be recorded using an audio-recording device during the interview.

Signature..... Date.....

(Participant)

Signature..... Date.....

*Appendix C: Interview Guide*

**Interview guide**

**Demographic Information:**

- Can you please tell me about yourself...
- Age
- Home Town
- First Language
- Race
- Relationship status and family
- Number of children you have and their ages
- Department or faculty
- Level/ position in department/faculty
- Duration within this position

**Questions relating to your experience in a senior leadership position**

- Could you please tell me about your work, what you do and the position you occupy.
- Do you experience any challenges in this line of work?
  - Tell me more about your challenges.
  - Are any of these challenges specific to you as a woman or would these also apply to men?
- Would you say being a woman has shaped your experiences in this position?
  - How so?
  - In what ways has gender shaped your experiences in this position?
  - In what ways has race shaped your experiences in this position?
- Have you observed any differences in how members of the institution treat and respond to you as compared to how they interact with for example your black male, and white male and female counterparts?

- Did the Covid pandemic impact your experiences at work in any way?
  - If yes, how so?
- Do you make contributions to policy making within your position at work?
- To what extent do you participate in executive decisions on the functioning of the institution?
  - Would you say that your contributions towards shaping the institution and its policies have been recognized?
- How long has it taken for you to get to this position?
  - How long have you occupied this position?
- What would you say has helped you navigate this position?
- Did you receive any mentorship in navigating this position?
- Does the institution make (mentorship) opportunities available for women in senior leadership positions?
  - Can you tell me more about that?
- What other factors would you say shape/have impacted your experience and advancement and promotion in your work?
  - E.g. family, politics etc.

*Appendix D: Debriefing form***UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN****DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY****Debriefing Form*****Women in Senior Positions: Higher Education in eSwatini.***

Thank you for your participation within this study. No information was withheld from you during the study. You have the right to withdraw the data you provided prior to debriefing or without penalty.

**Contact details**

In the event of experiencing any distress during or after the interview, you may contact the following health care professionals. Each organisation listed below has a qualified Psychologist who will attend to any distress you may incur during the interview. All services listed below have no costs associated, please see contact details for:

- Courage to Conquer: +268 76221575
- Ministry of health: +268 76282672
- Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGGA): +268 25052899.

Should you have any questions about this project, please contact the principal investigator, Annette Dlamini at [annettedlamini@gmail.com](mailto:annettedlamini@gmail.com) or on 0761868801 and/or the research supervisor Dr Mandisa Malinga (Psychology, UCT) at [mandisa.malinga@uct.ac.za](mailto:mandisa.malinga@uct.ac.za) or on 021 650 4997. Alternatively, should you wish you contact the chair of the Research Ethics Committee, please contact Mrs Rosalind Adams (Psychology, UCT) at [Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za](mailto:Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za) or on 021 6503417.

*Appendix E: Ethical Clearance Letter*

**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**



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**Department of Psychology**

University of Cape Town Rondebosch 7701 South Africa  
Telephone (021) 650 3417  
Fax No. (021) 650 4104

17 May 2022

Annette Dlamini  
Department of Psychology  
University of Cape Town  
Rondebosch 7701

Dear Annette

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been given by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your study, *Black Women in Senior Leadership Positions, Higher Education in eSwatini*. The reference number is PSY2022-010.

I wish you all the best for your study.

Yours sincerely

Signed by candidate

Lauren Wild (PhD)  
Associate Professor  
Chair: Ethics Review Committee

*Appendix F: Permission Letter*

The Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini



Ministry of Education & Training

Tel: (+268) 2 4042491/5  
Fax: (+268) 2 404 3880

P. O. Box 39  
Mbabane, ESWATINI

3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2022

Attention:

**Head Teacher:**

University of Eswatini	Southern Africa Nazarene University
Eswatini Christian University	

THROUGH

Hhohho and Manzini Regional Education Officer

Dear Colleagues,

**RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO COLLECT DATA FOR UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN STUDENT – MS. ANNETTE DLAMINI**

1. The Ministry of Education and Training has received a request from Ms. Annette Dlamini, a student at the University of Cape Town that in order for her to fulfill her academic requirements at the University she has to collect data (conduct research) and his study or research topic is: “*Women in Senior Positions: Higher Education in Eswatini*”. The population for her study comprises of twenty participants who have knowledge of and have experienced the phenomenon under study – women in senior leadership positions in higher education institutions in Eswatini from the above mentioned Institutions. All details concerning the study are stated in the participants’ consent form which will have to be signed by all participants before Ms. Dlamini begins her data collection. Please note that parents will have to consent for all the participants below the age of 18 years participating in this study. Furthermore, you are expected to collect data for your study virtually.
2. The Ministry of Education and Training requests your office to assist Ms. Dlamini collect data from the above mentioned Institutions in the Hhohho and Manzini Regions as well as facilitate for the support she needs in her data collection process. Data collection period is one month.

Signed by candidate

**DR. NTOMBENHLE L. DLAMINI**  
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION & TRAINING



cc: Regional Education Officers – Hhohho and Manzini  
Chief Inspector – Tertiary  
3 Principals of the above mentioned Institutions  
Dr. Mandisa Malinga – Research Supervisor

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