A career framework for non-academic middle management women in higher education institutions in South Africa

by

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A CAREER FRAMEWORK FOR NON-ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGEMENT WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

I declare that the abovementioned topic and this whole thesis is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I also declare that I submitted the thesis to originality-checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at the University of South Africa (UNISA) for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

SIGNATURE DATE: November 2023

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I dedicate this work to my late parents, Mama and Papa Mogoba, whose unwavering faith in me continues to guide me. Their enduring influence is a constant guiding force in all of my endeavors.

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, higher education senior and executive leadership remains a domain dominated by the male gender despite policy assurances to alter this status quo. This study aimed to comprehend the narratives about the lived experiences and career progression of non-academic women in middle-level positions in South African higher education institutions (HEIs) and develop a career framework from this.

The study was guided by an interpretive research philosophy. It used a phenomenological research design and applied a qualitative research methodology. Its population of interest was middle-level non-academic managers in South African HEIs. From these, a purposive sample of 20 was drawn. Data was collected from this sample using semi-structured interviews, and the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach was used to analyse data. The resultant data was presented in themes and the form of a final model as envisaged.

The study's main findings was a framework that showed that career progression from current middle-management to senior-level leadership is a function of factors across three broad spheres: personal, organisational, and societal. These spheres were derived and reflected in the themes extracted in the analysis.

The study's framework could enable women's progression from middle-level management to senior management positions in HEIs. It supports recommendations across the personal, organisational and societal spheres that affect this progression. A significant recommendation to women professionals in HEIs is to normalise work-life balance. Women should not be forced to choose either one or the other. Instead, this balance should be recognised as a "normal" scenario whose policy accommodation must be lobbied for. Women should avoid making moral sacrifices to progress towards senior leadership. The focus should be on creating equal grounds for women to succeed as senior HE leaders. HEIs should develop career development policies addressing women's slow progression trajectories. HEIs should make more formalised mentorship programs available to women. HEIs require urgent cultural transformation to rid

institutions of dominant patriarchal systems. Leadership quota systems that balance the leadership composition of HEIs by race and gender should be enforced.

KEYWORDS: Middle-level managers, Senior management, Women in Higher education, South Africa, career progression, Non-academic

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This research was driven by the significance of acknowledging the valuable contribution women can make in fostering sustainable development and transformation within South African universities. South African university leadership has generally been dominated by men, making it critical to investigate the gender imbalance in university leadership. Such imbalances may impede university progress toward their goals as well as national efforts to achieve sustainable development and transformation. As a result, it was critical to conduct a thorough investigation into this matter.

For more than three centuries, South Africa has struggled with segregation issues, particularly those related to race, fundamental human rights, justice, and equality. Employment inequality was not only based on race but also on gender. When the new democratic government took office in 1994, it enacted legislation to end workplace discrimination against women. The Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (No 108 of 1996) stated that no individual may be discriminated against because of race, gender, or disability. The Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) with Affirmative Action Policy was introduced in 1998 to correct the historical imbalance in which women of all races were discriminated.

Despite a broad acceptance that gender inequality is a debilitating socio-economic problem that should be urgently addressed, and despite the existence of various policies and institutional bodies aimed at addressing this, the problem remains dominant in South African management and leadership circles (Ramohai, 2019). Even though women entering the workforce has steadily increased, only a small percentage advances to senior management positions. Scheepers, Douman, and Moodley (2018) state that in South Africa, only 4% of women occupy executive management positions, while a meagre 23% hold decision-making posts. These figures generally reflect a wider concern in which

men are regarded as more qualified and deserving than women. The decision by the South African government to support the inclusion and promotion of more women in the workplace is behind the local higher education institutions' visible attempts to engage more women in senior and executive positions. However, evidence shows that wide gaps exist between practice and reality.

Women often face unfavourable conditions in organisations such as higher education institutions, where the environment is highly political. To gain recognition and be considered as preferred leaders, women often need to engage in lobbying efforts and strategically construct a visible profile (Grove, 2013; Jarboe, 2013; Barool & Sajid, 2013). Lekchiri, Crowder, Schnerre, and Eversole's (2019) study conducted at a Moroccan tertiary institution, found various adverse and aggressive actions as common experiences among women: physical and verbal assaults, unequal disciplinary actions, sexual abuse and comparative low recognition and appreciation compared to men in similar positions.

Other studies have identified the glass ceiling (refer to paragraph 1.9.4). Discrimination by gender, gender-repressive organisational climates, and negative adverse judgments and stereotyping have also been identified as common experiences that work against women's success in HEIs (April & Sikatali, 2019; Cohen, Dalton, Holder-Webb, & McMillan, 2018; Khalid & Sekiguchi, 2019). Shepherd (2017) asserts that the above problems are rampant in the SA higher education environment.

In Ramohai's study (2019), it was found that women often leave their jobs in senior academic positions or switch to other tertiary institutions due to non-economic reasons, primarily driven by dissatisfaction with the institutional climate and practices. Deery (2008) and Trzebiatowski and Triana (2020) identified emotional exhaustion as a significant factor contributing to the turnover of women in management roles. Clark (2007) and Powell (2018) argue that organisational failure to accommodate women's needs is a key reason for the difficulty in retaining female employees.

Compelling reasons support the inclusion of women in leadership positions within organisations. Willows and Van der Linde (2016) contend that women have the capacity to elevate the quality of corporate governance, bringing about various advantages that can result in enhanced organisational outcomes. Additionally, the presence of women in leadership roles sparks creativity and nurtures innovation. Kengne (2016) has underscored the importance of women in the business realm, highlighting their adept monitoring skills and risk awareness. Willows and Van der Linde (2016) have stressed that women represent a valuable pool of intellectual resources that organisations should harness to attain a competitive edge. Groenewald, Odendaal, and Bezuidenhout (2019) have accentuated the advantages of having more women in top management positions, encompassing benefits in informational and social diversity. South Africa grapples with a shortage of skilled "knowledge workers" (Kerr-Phillips & Thomas, 2009), intensifying the challenge of replacing proficient employees, particularly at the managerial level. Organisations can optimize the competencies and professionalism of women by investing in diversity management. Scheepers et al. (2018) have proposed that organisations can introduce various talent management interventions to assist women in overcoming barriers to career advancement.

Cho and Huang (2012) affirmed that career progression is a pivotal element in retaining employees, as a dearth of opportunities for growth can breed discontent and eventually prompt their departure from the organisation. Ramohai (2019) concurred with this observation, noting that women frequently seek new positions for enhanced advancement prospects. Throughout history, women have encountered obstacles in ascending beyond specific managerial levels, often referred to as the "glass ceiling" phenomenon and have experienced a slower rate of promotion to senior positions compared to men, a phenomenon known as the "glass escalator" (Jauhar & Lau, 2018).

According to Jauhar and Lau (2018), advancing women in the workplace is not solely an equity initiative but a necessity for long-term national development. Consequently, it is crucial to prioritise the retention and progression of women in professional settings. Zhong, Blum, and Couch (2018) highlighted that women often juggle multiple roles,

including their responsibilities at home and work. Considering these dual responsibilities, organisations can support the retention of women as vital assets by implementing strategies to help them manage the balance between work and life.

The professional landscape is in a state of continual evolution, with the transformative role of women serving as a driving factor. As per the Quarterly Labour Force Survey in the second quarter of 2023, South Africa's labour force participation rate saw an increase from 58.6% to 59.6%, indicating a one percentage point year-on-year growth compared to the second quarter of 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Nevertheless, a substantial gender disparity persists, with women exhibiting a labour force participation rate of 54.3% compared to 64.9% for men, indicating a notable 10.6 percentage point difference. This data underscores the critical need for the implementation of workplace policies and practices tailored to the specific requirements of women, considering their significant presence in the workforce.

1.1.1 South African higher education historical context

The development of higher educational institutions (HEIs) in South Africa cannot be distanced from the country's historical context. The history of higher education (HE) in South Africa is traced back to 1829 when the South African College was established in Cape Town. Many colleges became universities later (Human Sciences Research Council [HSRC], 1972). The disreputable Extension of Universities Act 45 of 1959 legalised racially discriminatory student and employee recruitment, leading to the establishment of several HEIs that favoured particular races. As a result, these institutions were primarily administered by white males (Barnes, Baijnath, & Sattar, 2009).

In the apartheid era, the South African government oversaw 36 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) until 1994 (CHE, 2007/8). The financial strain posed by these 36 HEIs became significant for the first democratic government. Consequently, the amalgamation of some of these HEIs was deemed necessary and justified (Barnes et al., 2009). The outcome was a lasting legacy of racial disparities in the quality and level of education, a

consequence of the unequal tertiary education experienced by black and white individuals due to the policies of apartheid.

The South African higher education system initially grappled with imbalances rooted in gender and racial inequality, setting the foundation for the existing disparities. These challenges remain a legacy as the system still faces challenges in its attempt to bring about effective gender and racial transformation in some of the HEIs (Obers, 2014).

South Africa's government has implemented several initiatives to address past inequalities since the country's democratic elections in 1994. The National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001), the Employment Equity Act of 1998, and the Higher Education Act are examples of these interventions. The primary challenges for HEIs have been to correct historical gender and racial imbalances, transform the HE system to align with local and international priorities and adapt to emerging challenges and opportunities. The Higher Education White Paper of 1997 provides detailed insights into the challenges faced by the South African higher education system. In 2002, Professor Kader Asmal, the Minister of Higher Education at the time, announced a plan to address long-standing racial and gender inequalities, as well as the financial burden on the higher education system. This initiative aimed to reduce the number of public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) from 36 to 23 through mergers, as outlined in the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) released in March 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2001).

According to the NPHE, 11 of the merged institutions would be traditional universities, six would be universities of technology (formerly known as Technikons), and six would be comprehensive universities offering both university and Technikon-type programs. The primary objective of these mergers, as highlighted by Wyngaard and Kapp (2004), was the consolidation of the previously fragmented higher education system, aiming to eliminate inequalities and distortions within it.

As a result of these mergers and incorporations, South Africa currently has 26 public universities, including two newly established institutions. Despite these interventions, challenges such as capacity issues and gender disparities persist within the higher education system.

According to Moodly and Toni (2017), decolonisation and transformation include the reconstruction of HEI leadership. They go on to say that this necessitates a review, the dismantling of cultural and structural archetypes that universities have inherited, and a reimagining of higher education leadership. As a result, they emphasise that equity in female leadership representation has been recognised nationally and globally as a criterion (Moodly & Toni, 2017).

Female enrollment in higher education experienced a threefold increase worldwide between 1995 and 2018, according to Hurtando (2021). However, this report suggests that the gender gap in higher education has shown only marginal improvement in recent decades and closely mirrors the ongoing gender inequality prevalent in the labour market. Additionally, Hurtando (2021: 229) asserts that “despite women having 'equal access' to academic education and careers, there is still a lack of 'equal outcomes' in terms of leadership and academic positions, remuneration, research, and publications within the higher education setting.”

The significance of improving gender balance in higher education management and leadership positions is becoming more widely recognised worldwide, as it is not only a social issue but also has an economic impact. Akala (2018: 229) highlights that access to employment opportunities is unevenly distributed, stating that "mechanisms to ensure equal opportunities and outcomes for women in higher education are elusive." Additionally, as noted by Oikelome (2017), institutions often exclude women through micro-politics, such as networking and other informal interactions. Consequently, female academics and administrators may feel unmotivated to apply for and compete for leadership positions. Given the low level of representation, the ascent to leadership positions in universities becomes challenging for women.

Throughout history, women have not received guidance or mentorship to assume leadership roles at any stage of their lives. They were not only perceived as being of lower status but were also marginalised and denied equal opportunities, as noted by Akala (2018). Leadership positions and other public domains were predominantly considered a privilege reserved for men, while women were confined to traditional household responsibilities. Consequently, Akala (2018) references a range of scholars, including Nico and Coetzee (2011) and Thomas (2013), who argue that culture plays a significant role in any deliberate process of transformation and change. Implementing diversity initiatives within decentralised, loosely connected, and change-resistant institutions such as colleges and universities presents a global challenge. A shift in the organisational climate and culture is imperative to make a diversity agenda successful. Scholars in higher education consistently emphasize that leadership styles play a crucial role in the success of institutional change, particularly in the context of diversity initiatives. Research conducted in higher education settings has unveiled the emergence of distinct subcultures due to the loosely connected nature of various institutional sub-units (Johnson, 2014). These subcultures can pose challenges to a meticulously planned transformation process, underscoring the necessity of customizing each step to address the specific cultural needs of different subgroups in order to bring about effective change.

Men's cultural dominance over women is widespread. This same tendency crept into education, particularly at the university level, which was designed for men (Idahosa, 2021). As a result, women were underrepresented in South African universities. In the initial phase of women entering the educational sphere as students, their presence was predominantly concentrated in fields such as education and nursing, often seen as extensions of their domestic roles (Idahosa, 2021). As women began to join the workforce within universities, their roles were initially limited to positions like typists and clerks. Today, the leadership landscape in academia still sees a notable scarcity of women. This scarcity poses a challenge for women in building a critical mass that would enable them to propel themselves into leadership positions within South African universities (Coetzee, 2001).

The scarcity of female leaders in South African universities may be due to the patriarchy that also runs high in general society. Being part of society, therefore, exposes them to practices and norms that look down upon women. These patriarchal tendencies can be seen in the very nature of education and leadership. Mejuini (2013) contends that the education provided in higher education can disempower women as patriarchal beliefs of male dominance and female subservience mar it. Ultimately, it shapes who women become (Mejuini, 2013). According to Shepherd (2017), while international data on women's representation in senior higher education leadership roles is somewhat patchy, which may indicate the issue's relative lack of importance, the dominant narrative that emerges is one of a lack of women leadership.

Several scholars have written about the significance of women in moving organisations forward (Johnson, 2014; Moodly & Toni, 2017; Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013). The under-representation of women in higher education in South Africa inspired the current study. This study seeks to discover how gender influences women's leadership lived experiences and aspirations. In the current South African context, the researcher is aware of organisational efforts focused on transformation, especially given the country's ongoing restitution process for its colonial and apartheid past. Despite scholarly evidence that transformation is essential, institutions fail to transform.

A review of the literature revealed that women in higher education have been viewed as important and alternative in the development of higher education in Africa (Akala & Divala, 2016). According to Jansen (2014), HEIs do not prioritise women's development. Women’s development is token in nature, characterised by inadequate and unsuitable programs and opportunities (Jansen, 2014). Jansen (2014) gives very occasional and short developmental workshops as an example of the so-called investments into women's leadership development. Jansen (2014) asserts that HE leaders should stop making excuses for the underrepresentation of women in academic and administrative positions and instead actively select qualified women for these roles for which they have been trained and prepared.

Although, as Jansen reveals, HE leaders frequently blame the lack of appropriate female applicants for leadership posts, data proves that this is the opposite. There is evidence of highly qualified and experienced women looking for leadership positions they never get (Jansen, 2014). In higher education and other institutions, women are often overlooked in micropolitics (networking and other informal interactions) (Oikelome, 2017). Oikelome (2017) further claims that, as a result, many senior academic women refrain from pursuing leadership positions. He further states that with such a skewed level of representation, it is difficult for women to advance to leadership positions in universities. The situation in universities mirrors that of larger African societies today. According to the 2020 Higher Education Management Information Systems (HEMIS) report published, women held 39% of executive posts at South African universities. This represents an increase from 35% reported in 2019.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The focal issue addressed in the study revolves around the underrepresentation of women in senior non-academic leadership positions within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. This underrepresentation is attributed to the sluggish and nearly stagnant pace of gender transformation. This is concerning as it represents a state of discrimination and gender oppression that denies women opportunities to contribute to HEI development effectively. Further, without visible, gender-diversified leadership at senior HEI leadership levels, such positions may be misconstrued as a domain for male non-academic staff. This perception may persist and impede women's advancement in higher education. While some studies inform this problem, there is a shortage of qualitative research examining the real-life experiences of women who felt sidelined and discriminated against by the HEI's gender-skewed leadership systems (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017; Pagan, 2018).

1.2.1 Personal reflections as a motivation for this study

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2014), researchers may be motivated to comprehend a phenomenon based on their personal experiences. Similarly, my own personal background and professional experiences influenced my decision to explore the topic of

career development barriers to non-academic middle management women in HEIs in South Africa. Having encountered various professional, societal, and personal obstacles to career advancement, I was inspired to research this phenomenon.

In 2001, my journey as a female non-academic administrator in higher education began. I was appointed the Employment Equity and Transformation Deputy Director in 2004. During this period, I pursued and obtained a master's degree while balancing my responsibilities as an employee, mother, and wife. While I received support from the institution as an employee and individual, I encountered barriers to career advancement. This experience exposed me to the gender and racial inequities prevalent in HE management.

Consequently, I shifted my emphasis from transformation activism to developing my educational career, prioritizing research to attain my Ph. D. and increase my publishing output. Having observed and discussed with colleagues who are middle management non-academic women in HEIs, who are in similar circumstances as myself, they became a source of inspiration to conduct a comprehensive investigation aimed at exploring and detailing the lived experiences of individuals.

My personal experiences influenced my choice of research topic and guided my methodological choices, as evidenced by my adoption of constructivist and feminist paradigms in the study (detailed in Chapter 2).

It is crucial to recognize my personal background in this study, as my own views and experiences have unavoidably shaped my perspectives and interpretations and the findings co-created with participants. Therefore, the outcomes of this research may differ from those of other studies, yet they continue to play a role in advancing knowledge in the field. This research has also personally influenced me by prompting introspection on my own career trajectory, leading me to identify my multifaceted roles as a woman, a mother, a researcher, and an administrator. Through this research journey, I gained a deeper understanding of my career trajectory in the South African higher education context.

While the use of the first person in writing has traditionally been discouraged, it is gaining acceptance in qualitative research. In a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) framework, the collaboration between the researcher and participants is emphasized, leading to a joint effort in producing the final analysis. The foundational assumptions of constructivism acknowledge subjectivity, with information seen as contingent on the interaction between the researcher and participants (Mong Ha, 2011). In recognition of my role in data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings, I adopt a self-reflective approach in my writing.

Compared to quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers tend to be more transparent about their involvement in the research process. The cultural, social, gender, class, and personal perspectives that researchers bring to their work influence the writing and production of qualitative research (Crotty, 1998). Hence, I cannot claim complete impartiality as a researcher. As Lambert, Jomeen, and McSherry (2010) and Creswell (2013) affirm, all writing is inherently "positioned" within a particular stance.

1.3 RESEARCHER'S MOTIVATION

There is a common suggestion that a means to foster a non-oppressive society is to reshape the university environment, envisioning it as an inclusive institution rather than an exclusive one (Ramani & Malema, 2012).

The importance of achieving gender-balanced representation in higher education management and leadership roles is growing globally, as it is not only a social issue but also has economic implications. As outlined by Akala (2018), there is an ongoing disparity in the distribution of employment opportunities, and the establishment of mechanisms to guarantee equal opportunities and outcomes for women in higher education poses significant challenges.

Education White Paper 3 (Republic of South Africa, 1996), the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001, South Africa), and the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill (Republic of South Africa, 2013) are examples of legislation

addressing these resulting inequities. Notwithstanding these efforts, research indicates that women in higher education have encountered stagnation, remaining predominantly in middle-management positions (Moodly & Toni, 2017). However, the number of female Vice Chancellors has increased. For example, "the percentage was 15.38" in 2020, 2019, and 2016, which is four women out of 26 (Tau, 2023).

According to Diaz (2019), the specific tasks of middle managers may differ depending on the industry, but their primary responsibility is to supervise employees and implement the company's vision as directed by upper management. Henderikx and Stoffers (2022) assert that middle managers hold a crucial role in guiding and facilitating change processes. They are responsible for translating organisational strategies into day-to-day operations and simultaneously managing and leading these operations. They further declare that they have extensive knowledge of the organisation as well as connections at multiple levels within it (Henderikx & Stoffers, 2022).

According to University World News (2021), female enrolment in higher education increased threefold globally between 1995 and 2018. A recent research, by Schreiber, and Zinn (2023), has revealed that little progress has been made to reduce the gender gap in higher education in recent decades, and is consistent with the ongoing gender inequality in the labour market. Furthermore, despite recent progress toward equal access to academic education and career opportunities for women, a recent study found that they still face unequal outcomes in terms of leadership and academic positions, pay, research, and publications in Higher Education.

Despite ideological and policy commitments to gender equality, South Africa has experienced almost stagnant progress in diminishing or eradicating the unequal representation of women in top management positions (Ramohai, 2019). This study has the potential to advance knowledge by investigating the contextual factors that influence transformation initiative implementation. The study could also contribute to the conversation about organisational transformation and, as a result, improve understanding of South African transformation processes.

1.4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This section examines the study's aim, research objectives, and the questions that guided the research:

1.4.1 Aim of the Study

The study aimed to comprehend the narratives concerning the lived experiences and career progression of non-academic women in middle-level positions within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Additionally, the objective was to derive a career framework from these narratives for the benefit of these women.

1.4.2 Objectives of the study

Below are the study's four research objectives:

1. To analyze discourses related to women in Higher Education (HE) and identify both success factors and hindrances affecting the career development of non-academic women in mid-level leadership positions.
2. To explore frameworks and theories of career development, particularly those that impact women.
3. To explore, describe, and elucidate the career development trajectories of non-academic women in middle-level positions within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa.
4. To formulate a comprehensive career development framework that elucidates the career trajectories of non-academic women aiming for senior leadership roles in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa.

1.5 RESEARCH METHOD

This study applied constructivist grounded theory (CGT) to provide an in-depth understanding of middle leadership women's experiences in higher education in South Africa. I hope that in unpacking the career experiences of these women participants, they would bring to light elements of a model to address career paths for women aspiring to be in executive leadership positions in HEIs.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.6.1 Main research question

More specifically, this study aims to address the following central question: "What are the factors that influence the lived experiences and career trajectories of women in non-academic mid-leadership positions who aspire to attain senior leadership roles in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa?"

1.6.2 Sub-questions

To comprehensively address the main research question, the following sub-questions are presented:

- What are the personal and career journeys of women in middle-level non-academic positions in HEIs?
- What challenges do women in middle-level non-academic positions experience in leadership?
- What coping strategies have women in middle-level non-academic positions in HEIs applied in their career journeys?
- What programs do HEIs have in place to accelerate the development of women at mid-level leadership?
- What are the career ambitions of women in HEIs at mid-level leadership?

1.7 EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

A review of the literature, observations, and current statistics from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa indicates a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the actual representation of women in senior leadership positions within higher education. Additionally, there is insufficient data on the factors influencing non-academic women seeking senior leadership roles. Therefore, this study aims to comprehend the narratives concerning the lived experiences and career progression of non-academic women in middle-level positions within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The study's findings are intended to contribute to the literature on gender and leadership progression,

specifically regarding the significant career transition from mid to senior leadership levels in HEIs. Such insights are not widely available in the South African literature (Herbst, 2020). The dissemination of these research findings through various channels can contribute to mitigating both visible and concealed discrimination. Moreover, it can serve as encouragement for more non-academic women professionals in HEIs to pursue leadership roles within higher education institutions.

The study is anticipated to offer essential guidance for non-academic women with aspirations to ascend to senior leadership positions in higher education. The findings will contribute theoretical insights and practical strategies for navigating the gendered landscape of senior leadership within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Thus, it will not only assume that women's career progress amid inequality can only be addressed through policy. Women at all leadership and seniority levels can contribute to their own success even in this challenging environment. When non-academic women hold top positions in HEIs, they serve as role models for women in society (Herbst, 2020). They may receive more societal recognition for overcoming obstacles such as the "glass ceiling" and the "glass cliff." They will also provide policymakers with information about the existing gender disparities in senior leadership positions in HEIs and suggest practical strategies for addressing them.

This study's constructivist grounded theory approach will contribute to the development of a deeper theoretical and practical understanding of the multiple factors that affect women non-academic middle managers' ascension to senior leadership positions in HEIs. The study will integrate the various factors, as extracted from women's narratives and experiences, into a single theoretical framework that can be used to predict the trajectories of women desiring and attempting to move from their current middle management positions to senior positions. The model or framework also captures the historical factors that the women have been exposed to ever since they started their career journeys. To my understanding as a researcher, no framework focuses on women non-academic middle-managers' struggles and successes with career progression in the South African HEI space.

Methodologically, as far as I could find, not many studies tackle career progression and gender challenges from a constructivist grounded theory approach. Most studies, including Turner, Norwood and Noe (2013) and Vasconcelos (2018) rely on existing theories but do not extract theories from the participants themselves. This study's methodological approach empowers women as their stories develop theories rather than common scenarios where theories are forced into narratives. I believe this approach will gain further popularity as other researchers will be able to draw upon this work in their attempts to look at career development and gender from a constructive grounded theory approach.

Finally, the findings may provide empirical findings to policymakers and senior officials at HEIs, allowing them to make evidence-based decisions in their respective universities and positions.

An indispensable aspect of high-quality doctoral research lies in the capacity to provide original insights to the field under examination. This study aims to make both theoretical and practical contributions to the existing body of knowledge. Additionally, it has the potential to contribute to the discourse on organisational transformation, thereby advancing understanding of South African transformation processes. Lastly, the study is expected to offer recommendations and identify areas for future research.

1.8 DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of the study was to comprehend the narratives regarding the lived experiences and career advancement of non-academic women in middle-level positions within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and subsequently formulate a career framework for their benefit. Consequently, the study aimed to gain insights into the experiences of non-academic women in mid-level management within HEIs, seeking to understand the factors contributing to their limited career progression to senior management positions. The study, therefore, was geographically delimited to HEIs in South Africa and conceptually to the non-academic women in middle management in SA HEIs. It targeted those in non-academic middle management, and they are HERS-SA graduates (refer to paragraph 2.11.1)

1.9 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

1.9.1 Feminist perspective

The feminist perspective serves as a theoretical framework that aims to analyze and challenge the existing gender disparities and power imbalances between men and women. It seeks to comprehend and transform the social, cultural, and political structures that perpetuate gender-based oppression and discrimination (Hook, 1984).

1.9.2 Glass ceiling

The term "glass ceiling," as defined by Mwashita, Zungu, and Abrahams (2020), symbolizes the metaphorical barrier that impedes the progress of women and other marginalized groups, preventing them from ascending to higher positions in the workplace and academia. Despite some advancements made over the years, women are still significantly underrepresented in higher education's top leadership roles.

1.9.3 Middle management

The day-to-day duties of a middle manager vary depending on the industry, but the primary purpose is to supervise employees and implement the company vision from upper management, according to Diaz (2019). These core responsibilities are critical for company progress; without them, progress comes to a halt. This is frequently caused by the "frozen middle" (Diaz, 2019). Several factors have contributed to this situation. Middle managers often find themselves in a state of stagnation, feeling undervalued, burdened with excessive workloads, and frequently overlooked. The long hours and substantial personal sacrifices that are characteristic of middle management positions only contribute to this dissatisfaction. This is particularly pronounced among female middle managers. According to McKinsey and Company (2020), in collaboration with The Wall Street Journal Task Force on the Economy, "Many women opt into staff roles, become stuck in middle management, or leave without ever giving their companies a chance to address their concerns."

1.9.4 Senior leadership

Senior leaders are "the top managers of an organisation, responsible for setting goals and strategies, making resource allocation decisions, and ensuring that the organisation achieves its objectives" (Hackman, 2002). John Kotter (2013) defines senior leaders as "the people at the top of an organisation who are responsible for making major decisions about the organisation's direction and future".

1.9.5 Non-academic

Refers to those staff members or employees of the university who are not involved in instructional duties. These include administrative staff, secretarial, health personnel and librarians (UNESCO, 2024).

1.10 ASSUMPTIONS

Assumptions are defined by Kele and Pietersen (2015) as aspects of research that are believed to be fundamentally possible – even without much evidence. It was assumed in this study that the participants would provide accurate, reliable, and relevant data, as well as the necessary skills and confidence. Also, it was assumed that non-academic women in middle management had a desire to progress to senior management levels. Furthermore, the researcher assumed that data gathered through face-to-face interviews would be objective and accurate in translation and interpretation. Finally, it was anticipated that the findings would be significant and would contribute to our understanding of female administrators' career paths, particularly their aspirations for senior leadership roles.

1.11 RESEARCH PARADIGM, METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

While there are many ways of inquiring about a phenomenon of interest, researchers and scholars of research hold different core principles on how research should be done and on what constitutes a quality and appropriate study. Fundamental principles (or worldviews), rules, and norms developed to quantify and qualify research are called paradigms or philosophical assumptions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). The research paradigms of this study are briefly explained in this section.

1.11.1 Research paradigm

The debate on research philosophies must be first understood before the rigorous process of selecting the appropriate research paradigm can be embarked upon. The stance adopted is supported by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), who posit that a researcher can make sound choices on how best to engage with the research participants through a deeper understanding of the research philosophy or paradigm. The research paradigm is a map that enables readers to follow up on how a particular study was conducted (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Research paradigm also refers to a shared understanding by researchers who work on related topics about how such topics should be studied (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2014). Various research paradigms are discussed by scholars, including positivism (and post-positivism), constructivism, interpretivism, transformative, emancipatory, critical, pragmatism, and deconstructivism (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). The current section, however, discusses only two basic research paradigms, positivism and interpretivism, to justify the various activities the researcher undertook in the study. These two paradigms are also the most common ones in research. Their discussion here is done as part of the background information as well as to demonstrate understanding by the researcher.

This qualitative, phenomenological study was influenced by the interpretivist paradigm and the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) theoretical views.

1.12 CHAPTERS OUTLINE

This thesis is structured into five chapters, organized as follows:

1.12.1 Chapter 1

Chapter 1 introduces the study, its background, aims and objectives. The study's problem of concern and a brief guide of how it will be investigated are also provided in Chapter 1. This is in addition to the study's significance and contribution to society, assumptions, limitations, and key concepts.

1.12.2 Chapter 2

Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to the study and lays the theoretical foundations for the study. In this chapter, I introduced three theoretical frameworks and career models that place a strong emphasis on promoting gender equity in the workplace. The literature review delved into women's career experiences in higher education, their experiences as leaders, women's roles in higher education with a focus on career development, gender roles, and career expectations, and the development of leadership identity.

1.12.3 Chapter 3

Chapter 3 will describe the research methods used to collect data for this study. The issues to be covered under the methodology chapter will include the research paradigm, research design and approach adopted in the study. The chapter will also outline the population and the sampling procedures involved. Data collection, the instruments used, and data analysis procedures are also discussed in detail, including ethical considerations involved in the study.

1.12.4 Chapter 4

This serves as the data presentation, analysis and discussion chapter. In Chapter 4, the study's framework developed using the constructivist ground theory approach is presented and discussed.

1.12.5 Chapter 5

This chapter will present the summary, recommendations and the main conclusions of the study.

1.13 CONCLUSION

This chapter introduced the study, its aims, objectives and research questions. The chapter also defined the study's problem of interest as the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions in South African HEIs. As noted in the research statement, there is limited, visible gender diversity at the senior leadership level in HEIs, and this unbalanced state of affairs needs to be addressed. The study was designed first to

understand the narratives and perspectives of mid-level non-academic managers and second to prescribe possible solutions to this problem. The next chapter reviews the literature that is related to the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

As a new researcher, I initially found it challenging to adopt the constructivist grounded theory (GT) methodology. While traditional GT approaches discourage conducting a review of the literature before analyzing research data, I considered the common practice in thesis writing and this requires a detailed literature review to assess the extent to which research topics of interest are covered by other scholars. To avoid manipulating the data to fit existing notions and arguments, Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978) recommended performing a literature review only after analyzing the data.

Modern Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) theorists, on the other hand, such as Charmaz (2006, 2014), advise conducting a literature review before beginning fieldwork. According to Charmaz (2014), this is beneficial for establishing theoretical sensitivity to a topic. I applied the above view and carried out a literature review first.

The current chapter examines the literature important to this research. The emphasis is on the circumstances that make women's advancement to leadership an important transformation issue in the new democracy. The literature I reviewed is intended to establish what is currently known about the nature of South Africa's HEIs so that previous research can be referenced. The literature was also intended to demonstrate my comprehension of the issues under consideration. Various issues concerning women's leadership are also addressed, as any transformation effort is heavily reliant on the capacity and will of institutional leadership.

Studies on leadership have grown in the academic world, with Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci, and Burke (2017) claiming that a recent search on the Web of Science for "leadership" yielded over 165,000 articles. Surprisingly, only about five of the articles are about women. Given the escalating calls for equality and gender empowerment globally, it becomes crucial to investigate how social identity variables, such as gender, interact with leadership. The chapter begins with a detailed discussion of Feminist theory, the

critical mass theory, and the social-ecological model by Bronfenbrenner as the potential theories that can be used not only to explain the considerations of non-academic mid-level women leaders in South African institutions of higher learning but also to mobilize HEIs for rapid transformation.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section aims to outline, discuss, and critique key theories that are closely related to the research study's topical issues. Feminist theories and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theories are examples.

2.2.1 Feminist theories and constructivist paradigms

Feminist theories have had a significant impact on the subjects and approaches employed in current research, with feminist scholars highlighting the importance of establishing trustworthy, practical, and activism-driven research (Heynen & Pérez-Moreno, 2022; Lather, 1986). As an example, researchers have begun to investigate the diverse experiences of women in senior leadership roles in higher education (Sullivan, 2009; Kamassah, 2010; Montas-Hunter, 2012). The feminist theories' desire to empower women's voices strongly aligns with the interpretive paradigm's acceptance and accommodation of subjective perspectives (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

2.2.1.1 Identity development and the intersection of race, class, and gender

Feminist theory and feminist educational research scholars have played a significant role in shifting the focus of studies on identity development (Heynen & Perez-Moreno, 2022). In the 1970s, psychology researchers initiated a long-term study on women's development, specifically examining how the latter acquire knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). They conducted individual interviews with 135 women from educational institutions and family agencies, shedding light on how women perceive and create knowledge, and how their family and school environments influence this (Hall, 2019). Researchers studying women's identity development such as Crenshaw (1991) and Moodly and Toni (2017) challenged previous assumptions that compared men and women, providing insights into the unique challenges women face and the paths they

choose to take. These paths are characterised by capabilities, networks, and revision, as emphasized by Josselson (1996) and Mutolsky (2021). Gilligan's research highlighted the importance of relationships for women and questioned the traditional notion of development centred on separation and individuation.

Among the noteworthy works published on the intersection of race and gender are the works of Crenshaw (1989) and Crenshaw (1991). Crenshaw (1989) coins the term “intersectionality” which disputes the single categorization of discrimination according to race or gender lines in consideration of the plight of black women who are discriminated based on both gender and race. Concerning the discrimination of minority population groups, Black women are “multiply burdened” which makes the manifestation of such discrimination a complex phenomenon (Crenshaw, 1991). The complexity of discrimination experienced by black women therefore cannot be defined by what characterizes discrimination along gender lines which has been defined through the lens of white women. Furthermore, discrimination along racial lines has also been described from the lens of black men (Crenshaw, 1989). As such black men and white women cannot define the discrimination experienced by black women. To date, the work of Cranshew 1(989) continues to influence the feminist movement globally with applications beyond discrimination based on race and gender. Notably, intersectionality applies to other basis of discrimination such as class and ethnicity (Vogel, 2018).

In the 1990s and 2000s, research on women's economic status, leadership roles, and higher education expanded (Kemp, 1994). Researchers also investigated the intersection of race, class, and gender, as well as how these multiple identities affect the professional development of diverse women (Sparks, Przymus, Silveus, De La Fuente, & Cartmill, 2023). For example, a study of undergraduate women developed a theory of multiple identity dimensions, including gender, race, culture, and religion, and their varying significance to an individual's core sense of self (Weaverling, 2021). Furthermore, researchers explored the formation of leadership identity in senior academic women from diverse backgrounds, moving beyond narrow stereotypes to understand the complex and nuanced aspects of women's leadership roles (Jones & McEwan, 2000).

Studies also examined how demographic differences influence perceptions of fairness, and gender equity, and the impact of multicultural and gender influences on women's career development (Triana et al., 2021). The dynamics of gender, class and the devaluing of women's work have been widely researched (Hoskin, 2020). Women's contributions to political, professional and academic output are generally underrepresented.

The study of women's leadership narratives necessitates a critical examination of the intersections of race, class, gender, democracy, and society through the eyes of those involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Feminist theory provides a useful framework for examining these intersections, addressing issues of marginalization, oppression, and exploitation, and challenging existing social constructs about women and marginalized groups (Allen, 2023; Arnand, 2023).

2.2.2 Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development

Individuals perceive the work environment differently, according to research on institutional climate, and negative interactions with colleagues and supervisors can contribute to feelings of exclusion (Cress, 2002; Follmer, Sabat & Siuta, 2020; Maranto & Griffin, 2011). According to research, role conflict also contributes to negative workplace experiences (Grummell et al., 2009; Neale et al., 2010). These role conflicts suggest that institutional expectations compete with personal and family expectations, which has a negative impact on women's career experiences (Adisa, Aiyenitaju & Adekoya, 2021; Uddin, 2021).

Scholars have conducted extensive reviews of the literature to examine the role of the organisation in women's career development (Ballenger, 2010; Cook et al., 2005; Heilman, 2001; Shapiro et al., 2008), and researchers are beginning to study women's experiences of the institutional climate (Maranto & Griffin, 2011). Ballenger (2010), for example, investigated the structural and cultural conditions that create barriers and opportunities for women's advancement and discovered a lack of mentoring, exclusionary networks, and gender inequality among participants. Furthermore, these barriers represent invisible and artificial attitudinal and organisational biases that stifle or, in the

case of mentoring, provide opportunities for advancement for women (Ballenger, 2010). To better understand the impact of interconnected factors, I examine the role of systems, institutions, and contexts in women's leadership experiences using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development.

Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) offers a structure for examining how interactions among various contexts and systems can shape behaviour. It highlights interactions between (a) specific characteristics of settings (micro), (b) the interplay between different settings (meso), (c) external contexts that impact or are influenced by a particular setting (exo), and (d) overarching consistencies and the beliefs and ideologies associated with those consistencies at a systemic level (macro).

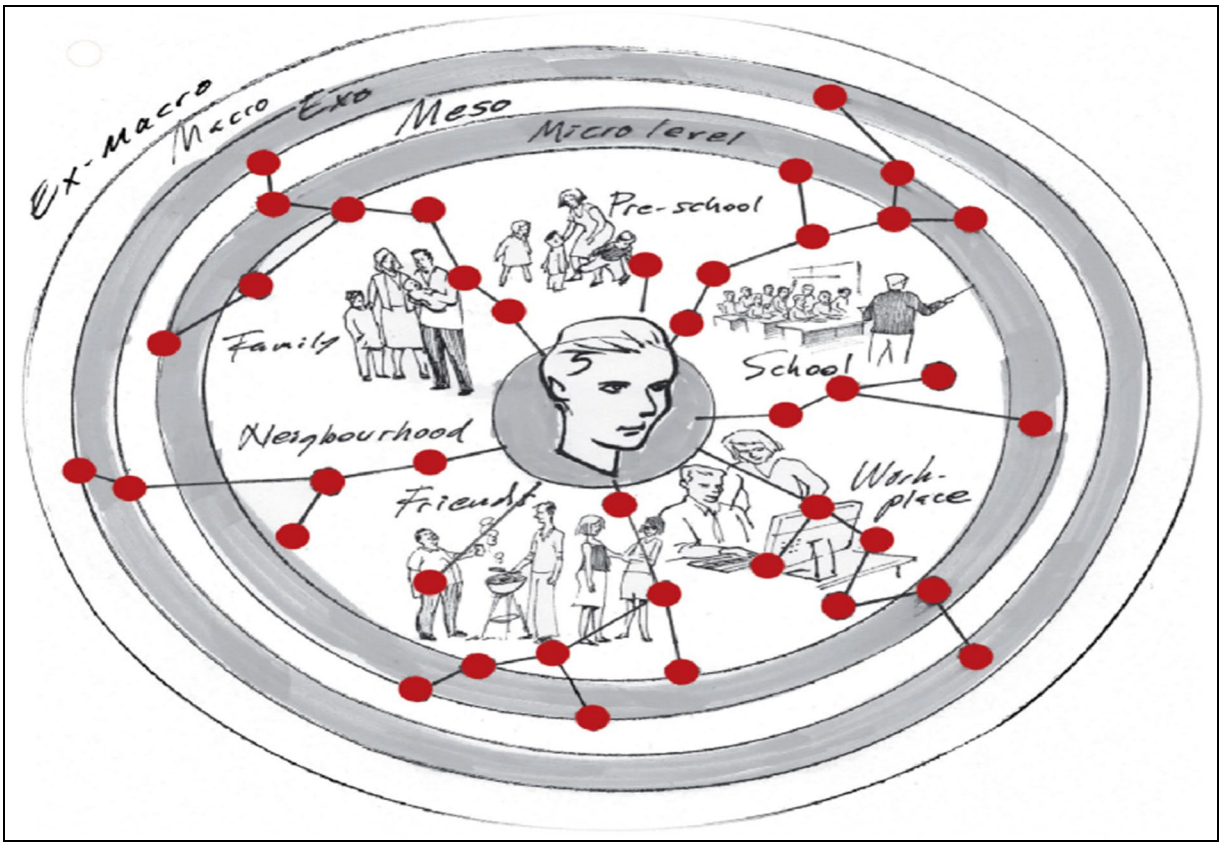

Figure 1: Social-Ecological Model Adopted from Bronfenbrenner (1977)

Each of these systems affects and is influenced by the individual (Trego & Wilson, 2021; Uskul & Shige Oishi, 2020). The microsystem, as described by Bronfenbrenner, represents the “pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by a developing person”, such as the specific office, department, or division where a woman works. The mesosystem comprises the interconnections among settings where an individual is actively engaged, such as the workplace, home, and community. The exosystem encompasses settings that do not directly involve the developing person but still have events that affect or are affected by what happens in the person's primary setting, like the institutional offices that create affirmative action policies. The macrosystem refers to the consistencies in lower-order systems (micro, meso, exo) at the cultural or subcultural level, along with the belief systems or ideologies underlying these consistencies, as noted by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

In essence, a system represents any context where a person interacts with their environment, and these interactions encompass behaviours and processes embedded within specific settings and external contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Trego & Wilson, 2021; Uskul &Oishi, 2020). Contexts and systems play essential roles in the theories of Hook (1984) and Lather (1992) and are significant within a constructivist paradigm. Researchers have proposed an ecological model of counselling interventions to enhance career development support for ethnically diverse individuals and women (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2005), but empirical support for this model is lacking. Other studies have explored the glass ceiling as an expression of organisational bias (Ballenger, 2010; Manzi & Heilman, 2021) and the impact of hierarchy, power, and the multiple identities of leaders (Lumby, 2009; Ozbay & Soybakis, 2020).

This study's theoretical framework emphasizes the idea that research and theory development can be empowering practices that encourage self-reflection and societal transformation (Lather, 1986). Understanding, intricate reconstructions, vicarious experiences, authenticity, and trustworthiness are all valued in research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, feminist theories and constructivist paradigms recognize reality's complexities and conflicts. To grasp reality, one must delve into the experiences of people

who have multiple identity characteristics. Individual perceptions of reality must be elicited by researchers through interactions between investigators and respondents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2.2.3 The critical mass theory

There is an important narrative on how women's career growth in the professional, academic, and political domains is driven or affected by critical mass. The concept is often discussed alongside concerns about why women in leadership positions do not uplift other women under their leadership. The judgmental view around the theory is that women in senior leadership positions should use their power to uplift other women (Amorelli & García-Sánchez, 2020). Researchers on gender issues, however, defend women in leadership with the argument that they still have not established the critical mass required to influence women-friendly gender transformation (Childs & Krook, 2006). As long as women remain in minorities, it is unlikely that they will be able to exert that kind of transformative influence (Funk, Paul & Philips, 2022). An increase in the number and proportion of women in power was, therefore, a prerequisite for the attainment of a critical mass that was large enough to influence gender policies and systems in organisations (Bryson, Barberg, Crosby & Patton, 2021).

Over the three decades, 'critical mass' has become prominent among gender issues stakeholders, including those that form the polity, the academia, and the media (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2010; Zembylas, 2013). At the same time, these stakeholders have also started to exhibit some doubt over the concept as a result of its failure to predict gender inclusivity in organisations that were dominated by women leaders (Funk et al., 2022). Some scholars even made empirical findings that went against the theory. For instance, Crowley (2004) found that some of the most influential women leaders were minorities in male-dominated entities yet were able to influence positive gender-inclusive change. Carroll (2001) also found that as the number of women leaders increased in some organisations, issues and matters relating to gender equity and equality became trivial. Such empirical findings have resulted in the deterioration of the theory's popularity

(Childs, 2004; Funk et al., 2022). Scholars such as Child and Krook (2006) even suggest the elimination of the theory from feminist discourse.

In this thesis, however, the intention is to draw on what might be gained by the 'critical mass' concept in workplaces such as HEIs. This study draws on the works of Kanter (1977a; 1977b) and Dahlerup (1988), who assert the validity and practicality of this theory. These scholars believe that the theory's applicability is evident in some systems. The above scholars extrapolated female leader behaviour as the proportion of women relative to men increased in organisations. In other words, they investigate the dynamics of marginalization on pro-women leadership behaviours as organisations accommodated more women.

2.2.3.1 'Skewed' and 'Tilted' proportions of group life

Kanter's studies centre on women in a large American institution during the 1970s. She discovered that the "comparative numbers of people with various social and cultural backgrounds" – stemming from significant factors like gender, race, and ethnicity – play a crucial role in shaping how groups relate to each other (Kanter, 1977a; Kanter, 1977b). To explain these interactions, Kanter creates a classification with four different majority-minority scenarios or groups:

- Groups with one social type dominate completely (100:0 ratio),
- Groups with one type are significantly more numerous (e.g., 85:15 ratio),
- Groups with a somewhat more balanced mix of social types (e.g., 65:35 ratio)
- Groups where the distribution is fairly even (e.g., 60:40 to 50:50 ratio)

Kanter observes that as the size of a group changes, so do the social dynamics (Kanter, 1977b).

However, Kanter's research is based on studying only one of these four groups, specifically a case where there are more men than women. Her main focus was to understand "what happens to women who occupy token positions in a group of mostly men" (Kanter, 1977a: 968). In these situations where men greatly outnumber women,

Kanter argues that the larger group, called the "dominants" holds control over the group and its culture. On the other hand, the smaller group, or the tokens, are reduced to symbolic representatives of their social category (Kanter, 1977a: 966).

Because tokens are a minority in the group, they are more visible, which leads the dominants to emphasise differences within the group. This compels tokens to conform to dominant norms while also facing stereotypes based on these perceived differences (Kanter, 1977a). Consequently, tokens face three specific challenges: 1) pressure to perform exceptionally well or remain inconspicuous; 2) isolation, where they must either stay as outsiders or adopt attitudes prejudiced against women to fit in; and 3) being trapped in certain roles, such as the mother, the seductress, the pet, or the iron maiden. As a result, tokens, even when there are two of them, find it hard to form a strong alliance in the group (Kanter, 1977a).

Therefore, when there are not enough women in the group to create a counterculture, tokenism perpetuates itself. Rather than paving the way for others, it reinforces the low numbers of women, making external intervention the only way to increase their presence (Kanter, 1977a, 1977b; Nemerever & Parry, 2022).

When considering how the above phenomenon might change when moving from a group where men outnumber women (skewed) to a group with a more balanced mix (tilted), Kanter presents three ideas about how women's behaviour might change as the dominants' perceptions and the tokens' responses change. The first idea is that "when there are more women relative to men, the minority members can become potential allies, form alliances, and influence the group's culture." The second idea is that "as the number of women increases in comparison to men, the minority members begin to stand out as individuals with distinct characteristics." These two concepts suggest that in tilted groups, women can escape the pressures to overachieve and the feelings of isolation that came from being tokens in skewed groups. This change allows them to build alliances with other women and break free from restrictive female stereotypes, pursuing their interests more freely (Kwon, Moon & Kim, 2023; Nemerever & Parry, 2022). Kanter does not specify

which scenario is more likely but suggests that it ultimately depends on individual women's choices.

Kanter's third insight concerns the idea that even if the overall number of women does not change much in a group, the presence of "feminist" or "women-identified-women" can help alleviate the challenges of tokenism, such as performance pressure, isolation, and role limitations if these women form alliances (Kanter, 1977b: 238). So, in situations where there are only a few women, the characteristics and beliefs of individual women become essential because group dynamics are influenced by various factors (Kanter, 1977a: 966). However, she acknowledges that with only two tokens, they can be easily separated, which is why she adds that a larger number is necessary for these supportive alliances to form in token contexts (Kanter, 1977b: 238). Nevertheless, her argument underscores that having feminists who are dedicated to women's interests is crucial for creating a more women-friendly environment, and the number of women may matter less than the presence of women who strongly identify with women's issues.

2.2.3.2 Small and large minorities of women in politics

Dahlerup expands Kanter's theory to research on women in politics, partly in response to female politicians' increasing use of the "critical mass" concept in the mid-1980s to describe the limitations of "acting for" women. Dahlerup questions the suitability of this metaphor for understanding political behaviour and instead uses Kanter's work to compare the performance pressures faced by saleswomen and female politicians. Female politicians must demonstrate that they are "just as able as male politicians" while also proving that "it makes a difference when women are elected" (Dahlerup, 1988: 279). Dahlerup takes a gendered perspective, emphasizing how women's minority status in politics intersects with their minority group status in society. She identifies six areas where women could impact politics: fewer women leaving politics, a more consensual political style and family-friendly working arrangements, a broader definition of "political" concerns, a feminisation of the political agenda, and increased influence and power for women in general.

While Dahlerup is cautious in her adaptation of Kanter's work, she only partially captures the shift in interaction dynamics as a group transitions from being skewed to tilted to balanced. She argues that in a tilted group, where the gender ratio is approximately 65:35 (as Kanter initially describes, although she interprets it more broadly from 15 to around 40), the minority becomes influential enough to impact the group's culture, and alliances among minority members become feasible (Dahlerup, 1988: 280). This single statement by Dahlerup transforms the 'critical mass' debate in two significant ways, with substantial implications for later research on the substantive representation of women.

Firstly, she emphasises the opportunity for women to form supportive alliances when their numbers increase without considering that a growing number of women might lead to greater diversity within the group. She also overlooks the possibility for women to have an impact even when they constitute a very small minority of all political representatives.

Secondly, she introduces a new definition of tilted groups as those where the fraction of women ranges from 15 to 40 per cent, covering the entire spectrum between skewed (85:15) and balanced groups (60:40). Simultaneously, she adheres to the common usage of the term 'critical mass' and identifies 30 per cent as the crucial cutoff point for evaluating the impact of women in Scandinavian politics, even though a strict interpretation of Kanter's work would classify such a group as skewed rather than tilted or balanced. Based on her redefinition, Dahlerup concludes that available empirical data does not support a clear relationship between specific percentages of women and changes in her six areas of interest. She suggests that factors beyond numbers, particularly those difficult to isolate or control, like broader shifts in societal attitudes, might better explain both change and lack of change following the increased presence of women in political office (Dahlerup, 1988: 276-8).

Furthermore, Dahlerup proposes that the mechanisms for change primarily rest on 'critical acts,' which are initiatives that "change the position of the minority and lead to further changes." These acts include the recruitment of other women, the introduction of quotas for women, new equality legislation, and equality institutions. These changes depend

crucially on "the willingness and ability of the minority to mobilise the resources of the organisation or institution to improve the situation for themselves and the whole group" (Dahlerup, 1988: 296).

In exploring this possibility, Dahlerup implicitly reaffirms Kanter's third assertion that feminist women can have a significant impact beyond their token representation by forming alliances despite their small numbers. However, she downplays Kanter's second claim, which underscores the importance of differences among women and how these differences might hinder coalition-building, regardless of whether women are present in higher or lower numbers (Dahlerup, 1988: 293). Nonetheless, Dahlerup remains cautious in her predictions when linking critical acts to larger proportions of women. She suggests that a "growing feminist consciousness among a growing number of women politicians could mean that women are reaching an important turning point, becoming a critical mass" (Dahlerup, 1988: 293). According to her, critical acts, the work of individuals, precede but do not necessarily lead to a critical mass, a larger group whose influence inevitably leads to significant political change. This shift in focus alters the optimistic connotations of the 'critical mass' concept into a future that is far more contingent, where outcomes depend significantly on individual actions.

The multifaceted nature and occasional inconsistencies in Dahlerup's argument can give rise to a range of different interpretations regarding the significance of numbers. For instance, she asserts that changes in responses to female politicians are influenced by the sheer number of women in politics, as it makes removing women from the public sphere seem hopeless. She states, "So, numbers do count." She argues that with the growing number of women in politics, stereotypes decrease because a variety of women now occupy the political arena (Dahlerup, 1988: 285). However, she also contends that it is not possible to conclude that these changes result from a specific number of women, like 30%, suggesting that "the performance of a few outstanding women as role models" may be more influential than sheer numbers (Dahlerup, 1988: 287).

Dahlerup makes similar arguments across the other areas she explores, moving between statements like "the entrance of just one woman into an all-male group ...changes the discussion and behaviour of that group" and the idea that "the higher the proportion of women, the more social conventions will change" (Dahlerup, 1988: 290). Consequently, her preference for the concept of 'critical acts' coexists with statements like "the opportunity for women to form majority coalitions ...increases when they constitute 30 per cent, rather than 5 per cent" (Dahlerup, 1988": 294), an assertion that relies on an assumption about numbers and outcomes that she ultimately abandons.

2.2.3.3 The diagnosis potential of critical mass theory

How might researchers and activists advance the troubled and troubling underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, particularly in Higher Education in developing countries, such as South Africa, and how might their work contribute to social change in the institutions and communities they work with? First, this thesis contends that several practices legitimize certain behaviours and genders, making it worthwhile to marginalize others. In seeking to understand the considerations of women in middle-level non-academic positions in pursuance of senior-level leadership positions in HEIs, these need to be understood, explained, and challenged. In this regard, the critical mass theory is applicable. Martin (2012) advocates for the need to identify, explain, and challenge the factors that produce and make acceptable individual and group behaviours that disregard other's lives, welfare, and aspirations, often through violent means. Steinberg and Kincheloe's (2010) conception of the need for critical theory in research is aligned with this idea. In these authorities, …critical theory, if nothing else, is a moral construct designed to reduce human suffering in the world. In the critical theoretical context, every individual is granted dignity regardless of his or her location in the web of reality. Thus, continuing human suffering by conscious human decision is a morally unacceptable behaviour that must be analysed, interpreted and changed (p. 140). Only when we understand the immorality of some of our decisions and actions and their negative impacts on others and act to change them can we hope to effect real social change in institutions and communities.

Examining the works of Kanter and Dahlerup can provide insight into why the increased representation of women in legislative bodies may not consistently result in the adoption of gender equality policies. This understanding can shed light on the current situation in South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The application of 'critical mass theory' encompasses various outcomes, notably scenarios where a higher number of women leads to minimal or no change, based on the argument that women have not yet reached a 'critical mass.' This thesis could propose that the proportion of women within an institution is the primary determinant of their behaviour.

This argument may signify a 'politics of optimism,' suggesting that gender disparities can be eradicated and the progress of women into leadership roles can occur without significant conflict, eliciting minimal or no resistance from men as a collective. This viewpoint may find support in the work of Bratton (2005), who observed that legislatures with a substantial representation of women were more likely to introduce and pass bills related to women's issues compared to male-dominated bodies. Skard and Haavio-Mannila (1985) also uncovered that an increase in the number of women correlates with a higher number and faster enactment of such bills.

2.2.3.4 Critical mass theory process map /study design

A process map is a visual representation of the steps involved in a particular process. The critical mass theory process typically involves four stages:

- The **first stage is the mobilisation stag**e, where the group or movement begins to gather momentum and attract supporters. This may involve identifying and recruiting influential individuals, creating awareness of the issue through social media or other channels, and building relationships with key stakeholders.
- The **second stage is the growth stage**, where the group or movement begins to gain momentum and attract a larger number of supporters. This may involve organising rallies, protests, or other events to raise awareness of the issue and build support.

- The **third state is the consolidation stage**, where the group or movement consolidates its gains and begins to exert influence on decision-makers. This may involve lobbying politicians, organising boycotts or strikes, or engaging in other forms of direct action.
- The **final stage is the institutionalisation stage**, where the group or movement becomes an established part of the political landscape, and its goals are enshrined in policy or law. This may involve forming political parties or advocacy groups or working with existing institutions to promote change.

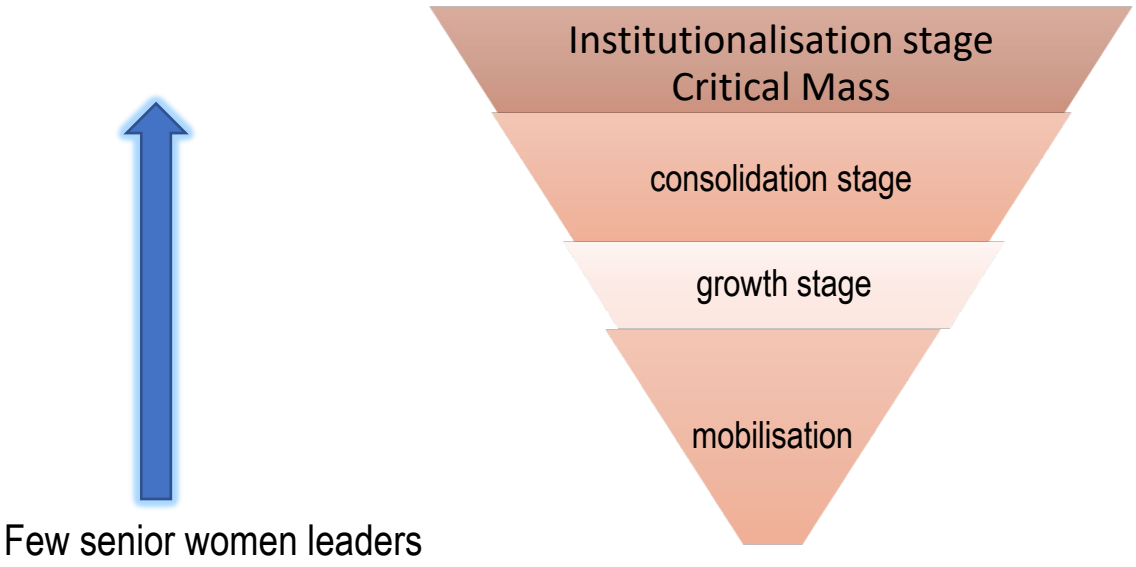

Figure 2: Critical Mass Theory Process Map (Researcher)

2.2.3.5 Combining the three theories

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, critical mass theory, and feminist theory offer valuable insights into understanding social systems, power dynamics, and the importance of representations. By combining these theories, we can understand how individuals, communities and societies are shaped by various levels of influence and how they intersect with gender dynamics.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory emphasises the influence of multiple systems on human development. It posits that individuals are embedded within nested ecological systems, ranging from immediate microsystems (such as family and peers) to broader macrosystems (including cultural values and societal structures). This theory highlights the reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environments, recognising that changes in one system can impact others.

On the other hand, critical mass theory focuses on the representation threshold needed to bring about significant social change. It suggests that marginalised groups can challenge power structures, influence decision-making processes, and drive systematic transformation when they achieve a critical mass within a particular context. This theory emphasises the importance of numerical representation to address inequality and create more inclusive environments.

Feminist theory analyses the social, political and economic inequalities experienced by women and seeks to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures. It examines power imbalances, gender roles, and how gender intersects with other societal identities. Feminist theory aims to achieve gender equality by challenging societal norms, advocating for women's rights, and amplifying women's voices and perspectives.

By combining these theories, we can better understand how gender inequality operates with ecological systems, as well as the potential for change through critical mass. The ecological perspective of Bronfenbrenner's theory assists us in understanding how various systems at various levels, such as families, communities, institutions, and societies, influence gender dynamics. It enables us to investigate the interactions, interdependencies, and power dynamics that shape gender roles, expectations, and opportunities within these systems.

Within this framework, critical mass theory emphasises the importance of adequately representing women within various systems to challenge gender inequality. It emphasises the significance of having a critical mass of women in power, decision-

making, and leadership positions to effect meaningful change. This theory reminds us that gender representation is about creating an environment in which diverse voices and perspectives can influence and transform existing power structures, not just numbers.

Incorporating feminist theory into this mix emphasises the intersectional nature of gender inequality, recognising that gender is inextricably linked to other social identities such as race, class, and sexuality. It emphasises the importance of addressing these intersections in achieving equality by highlighting how different women experience oppression and privilege based on their intersecting identities. Feminist theory encourages us to consider how gender inequality intersects with other power structures and to advocate for inclusive and intersectional approaches to dismantling these structures.

In conclusion, by combining Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, Critical Mass theory, and Feminist theory, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics that shape gender inequality and social change. This integrated approach recognises the reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environments, the importance of achieving critical mass for meaningful transformation, and the intersectional nature of gender dynamics. It lays the groundwork for addressing gender inequality holistically, considering the many systems that shape our lives and striving for inclusive and equitable societies.

2.3 A REVIEW OF GENDER TRANSFORMATION

The literature examined in this section concentrated on several key aspects, including the career journeys of women in higher education, their experiences as leaders, their involvement in higher education with an emphasis on career advancement, the influence of gender roles and expectations on careers, and the development of leadership identities. Additionally, the discussion delved into the representation of women in academic leadership roles, the intersection of gender and diversity issues, and the various paths leading to academic leadership positions.

2.3.1 Non-academic women in higher education

When looking for literature on women in higher education leadership, it becomes clear that the emphasis is on understanding the underrepresentation of women in higher education and the lack of diversity. Although leadership occurs at various levels, such as leadership in research women with senior positions. The discussion focuses on leadership definitions and execution, research diversity, leadership paths, and competency development. Finally, the focus is on the institutional climate.

2.3.2 Leadership defined

Rosari (2019:19) defines leadership as "an influence relationship between leaders and followers who intend to implement real changes that reflect their mutual goals." According to Lerutla and Steyn (2017), leadership is a concept known and referred to in organisations and societies as a construct associated with or thought to be a key to organisational effectiveness or societal success. It alludes to better business operations and performance and how people react to change. Researchers and scholars such as Nicola et al. (2020); Maak et al., (2021) and Garfield et al. (2021) from various disciplines have paid close attention to the concept of leadership on a global scale. Garfield et al. (2021) go on to say that leadership theories have advanced exponentially over the last two decades. Nonetheless, despite the recognition and 'alleged' importance of leadership and the increase in leadership research, there is no universal understanding of leadership. Similarly, they assert that leadership remains an elusive and contested concept and that agreement on what it entails is highly unlikely.

According to Moodly and Toni (2017), this situation is caused by several factors. These include, but are not limited to, the glass ceiling, a lack of mentors, a gendered organisational culture, a culture of service and caring leadership, prioritising family life, non-linear and non-chronological career paths, a lack of role models, and a lack of support from top management in a patriarchal organisational setting. It is also stated that, as is the case globally, South African women have increasingly accessed higher education and reached middle management positions but are unable to break through to the upper echelons (Shambare, 2011; Chanana, 2013; Shevel, 2014; Bulick & Frey, 2017). Nguyen

(2013) identifies psychological and cultural barriers to women's leadership advancement in her research on barriers to women's leadership advancement. Cubillo and Brown (2003) identify three levels from which cultural barriers emerge: the "macro" socio-political level, the "mesco" (also known as the meso environment) organisational level, and the "micro" individual level. The macro-level barriers are those cultural practices within the wider society that perpetuate women's inequality. At the meso level, are the organizational attributes that hinder women from career advancement such as lack of support from colleagues. The micro-level factors are the individual factors, which is how the women view themselves as leaders (Cubillo & Brown, 2003).

2.3.3 Paths to leadership

In a study of senior managers from four different countries, researchers interviewed both mend and women to explore fheir career journeys, management styles, and the influence of orgnaisational culture (Buhlmann et al., 2018). The participants' career paths were distinguished by factors such as invittaions, encouragement to apply for positions, and support from their families (Bühlmann et al., 2018). Some university rectors attributed their success to following an academic career path within the institution and receiving encouragement and mentoring.

Moscariello (2018) conducted a case study involving six female college presidents and found that there was no single, uniform career path that these women had followed to attain their leadership roles. The study revealed a common aspiration among them to drive change and tackle new challenges in their senior-level positions. Furthermore, other reseasrhers have examined the career trajectories of women in senior leadership roles. In a study of 43 African-American women presidents, participants typically held a doctoral degree, had worked outside of higher education at some point in their careers, and had previously held various positions before assuming the role of college president (Biddix, 2011). According to Biddix (2011), senior student affairs officers typically had careers spanning an average of 20 years and had undergone six job changes during their professional journey.

2.3.4 Capability development

Brignoli (2020) noted that women leaders in the USA often face expectations shaped by white male cultures and values. She argued that women must quickly attain a high level of competence, even in new leadership roles, to meet the elevated standards they are held to, all the while concealing any perceived skill deficits. Brignoli emphasised that individuals aspiring to leadership positions should focus on honing their competencies. In a study of college presidents, some female leaders were found to set exceptionally high standards as a way to avoid revealing any differences from men in similar positions (Brignoli, 2020). Brignoli (2020) reported interviewing six female community college presidents about their learning needs, attitudes toward knowledge gaps, learning strategies, and the impact of the college's culture. As a strategy for competence development, participants mentioned the importance of connecting with others and seeking mentors among their colleagues when they assumed their leadership roles.

Kamassah (2010) pointed out that other researchers have concentrated on the factors that enable Black women to succeed in leadership roles. These participants stressed the importance of values such as trust, honesty, and respect, along with the ability to motivate and inspire others in their work. As noted by Turner, Norwood and Noe (2013), the significance of skills like business and industry knowledge, general leadership abilities, and effective communication. Balancing life responsibilities, according to Turner et al. (2013) these studies can aid in the development of skills and competencies to overcome workplace obstacles to advancement.

According to Brignoli (2020), a less-discussed aspect of leadership competence is the development of an authentic leadership identity. Nonetheless, some studies have begun to explore women's experiences in establishing authentic leadership identities (Ramirez, 2015; Brue & Brue, 2018; Nakamura, Hinshaw & Burns, 2022). Women in positions of authority, such as presidents and vice presidents, have cultivated leadership styles founded on competence and trust, characterised by high expectations for themselves and others. Jefferson (2017) found that women in leadership roles employed various leadership styles, including authoritative and collaborative approaches, and valued traits

like accountability, honesty, and respect. While women leaders typically aimed to bring about transformation, offer support, and prioritise students' needs, they occasionally resorted to traditional leadership characteristics, such as exercising authority and adhering to hierarchical structures.

2.4 INSTITUTIONAL CLIMATE

As described by Fritz and Van Knippenberg (2017: 593), the atmosphere within higher education is shaped by cultural assumptions and norms regarding what is considered 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' conduct and verbal interactions in a particular educational or professional setting. A cold or unwelcoming climate is characterised by "informal exclusion, devaluation, and marginalisation" from workplace networks based on gender.

Institutional climate encompasses the perceptions, attitudes, and associated behaviours of institutional members regarding their organisation, as well as the symbols that represent their collective behavioural patterns (Choudhury & Das, 2020; Pecino, Mañas, Díaz-Fúnez, Aguilar-Parra, Padilla-Góngora, & López-Liria, 2019). It also encompasses the challenges and support available to students in higher education. Prior research, according to Brignoli (2020), has concentrated on the influence of the environment on women in the workplace, with a particular focus on women in higher education. The following section delves into the specific challenges faced by women in higher education.

2.5 ROLE CONFLICT

Johnson (2017) asserts that in interviews or surveys involving women discussing their careers and family life, a common theme that emerges is the challenge of balancing the care of young children with career advancement. Brue (2018) contends that managing both parenthood and a full-time job can often feel like simultaneously handling two full-time responsibilities. Turner (2018) argues that women in senior-level positions have recognised a conflict between pivotal career development and the years dedicated to raising children. It is widely believed that holding a senior managerial role involves increased work demands and potential conflicts between roles.

A study that followed the career paths of 549 women for 27 years discovered that factors such as time management, role conflict, and work-to-family conflict influenced their career paths (Shreffler, Shreffler, & Murfree, 2019). The study also discovered that women responsible for family care were less likely to apply for senior-level positions.

Brue (2018), notes that mastering the art of reconciling values and priorities proved to be essential for certain women, while others opted for a more gradual approach, leaning on the assistance of their partners and family members. Nonetheless, it is important to note that not all women have access to childcare services, which can pose significant challenges in their journey towards leadership positions.

2.6 CAREER PROGRESSION

Career progression can be described as the management of employees' development and their progress in learning and work throughout their professional journey (CiCA, 2016; Watts, 2016). It is primarily overseen by the employer, although there is also some influence and discretion on the part of the individual employee. This progression is primarily motivated by factors such as the desire for personal growth, recognition, the avoidance of stagnation, and the pursuit of self-realisation (Bown-Wilson & Parry, 2013). It's important to note that this concept can be defined from both subjective and objective perspectives. Career progression is the process of managing employees' development, learning and work progress throughout their careers (CiCA, 2016; Watts, 2016). Thus, career advancement is primarily controlled by the employer, with some control and judgment exercised by the individual employee and is motivated primarily by a desire for personal contribution, recognition, avoidance of stagnation, and self-realisation (Bown-Wilson & Parry, 2013). The concept, however, can be defined both subjectively and objectively. On a subjective level, progress can signify the realisation of one's maximum potential through self-improvement, while from an objective standpoint, career advancement can refer to the recognition and standing within one's profession, as well as progression within the organisational structure, job security, and achieving a satisfactory income (Santos, 2016). These perspectives align with the conclusions of other studies conducted in South Africa, including those by Visagie and Koekemoer

(2014) which also state that senior managers value personal growth as a measure of success such as owning their own business and developing their communities.

2.6.1 Potential barriers to career progression

Literature has identified several barriers to career advancement. A recruitment and promotion bias, which favours qualified, diverse candidates for leadership roles due to bias in promotion or hiring decisions, is one such barrier (Gonzalez, Fahy & Lien, 2020; Martin, 2013). Prejudices and hostile cultures can also lead to a bias in promoting current candidates (Mathur-Helm, 2006). According to Dessler (2015) and Steyn and Jackson (2014), bias often occurs during the initial stages of job analysis and definition of job requirements, as the hiring manager's beliefs shape the hiring manager's conceptions of an ideal candidate. Furthermore, during the promotion and hiring screening stages, the use of non-job-related information, such as race and gender, can introduce bias in decision-making (Cascio, 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Steyn & Jackson, 2014). Furthermore, past performance evaluations are frequently used as the basis for promotion, remuneration, and retention (Dessler, 2015). The bias of previous evaluating managers can influence promotion decisions, which may not accurately reflect a candidate's potential (Dessler, 2015). According to Mobley (1982) and Sharma (2016), a 4.8 per cent variance in performance appraisals can be attributed to employee and supervisor demographic differences. This is especially important in South Africa, with significant demographic disparities between management levels. Furthermore, networking abilities, being a part of the inner circle, interpersonal skill strength, and the provision of opportunities by managers all pose potential barriers to career advancement (Grimland, Vigoda-Gadot & Baruch, 2012; Visagie & Koekemoer, 2014; Santos, 2016; Wilson, 2016).

2.7 EXCLUSION

Experiencing exclusion can create challenges for women in obtaining vital support to manage their responsibilities. Research has indicated that the organisational culture and structure play a role in shaping feelings of connection or isolation. In male-dominated and hierarchical work environments, studies have found that women's achievements can have

a negative impact on their performance evaluations (Fritz & Van Knippenberg, 2017). Evaluators tended to give lower performance ratings to women whose competence levels were comparable to their own (i.e., very high competence). Furthermore, women who demonstrated competence and assumed leadership roles sometimes encountered a lack of support and received harsher evaluations of their work.

Brignoli (2020) conducted in-depth interviews with nine academic women and found that those working in supportive departmental environments benefited from promotions and felt encouraged to take time away from work for family matters. On the other hand, women in unsupportive or hostile environments reported that their colleagues were critical and obstructive, hindering their goal-setting and recognition for their work. These negative interactions with coworkers and supervisors could be influential factors leading women to leave their jobs, ultimately affecting occupational segregation and career progression.

Research in the fields of the labour market, career mobility, and occupational sex segregation has provided evidence of systemic and widespread occupational segregation (He, Kang, Tse, and Toh, 2019). Women employed in male-dominated occupations often face pressure to leave their jobs. Abbas, Abbas, and Ashiq (2021) discovered that as the percentage of men in a given occupation increased, women's likelihood of leaving their jobs also rose, even after controlling for skill requirements and family-related variables.

The presence of exclusive networks is associated with perceptions of limited mentoring and advancement opportunities (De Klerk and Verreynne, 2017), disadvantaging those outside these networks. Cullen and Perez-Truglia (2019: 4) refer to this phenomenon as a "good old boys' network," which becomes exclusive due to the concept of homophily or the "preference for others like oneself." Longitudinal research has indicated that professional networks are linked to higher salaries, promotions, perceived career success (Gander, 2019), and subsequent leadership positions.

Sullivan (2009) noted that women leaders are often evaluated according to standards established by White male norms and culture. As a result, women must swiftly and quietly

attain a high level of competence, even in new leadership roles, to meet the higher standards expected of them. Balancing family and career responsibilities can result in longer and slower career paths for women. Women's experiences have shown that gender role expectations impact both personal and professional relationships, with implications for career advancement and family obligations (Johnson, 2017).

2.8 MENTORING

Mentoring plays a significant role in influencing women's career journeys and their progress towards leadership roles, as noted by Moodly and Toni (2017). The study by Moodly and Toni (2017) extensively discusses women's leadership and mentoring, among other influential relationships or activities. Moreover, mentoring holds considerable importance for women aspiring to leadership positions in higher education for several reasons. "Conventional and contemporary perspectives on mentoring both suggest that mentoring relationships contribute uniquely and independently to a protégé's career success, beyond what the protégé's inherent skills, talents, and abilities may explain" (Moodly & Toni, 2017: 142). In simpler terms, mentoring positively impacts career-related outcomes irrespective of an individual's inherent characteristics.

Brabazon and Schulz (2020) found that individuals participating in a formal mentoring program designed to address the underrepresentation of women in senior academic roles experienced more positive outcomes, such as promotions and job retention, compared to a control group. In a survey of 35 women regarding their leadership journeys, 79% reported receiving positive and supportive mentoring throughout their careers (Ballenger, 2010). These women highlighted that they received guidance from supportive advisors, informal mentors, and formal mentoring initiatives, both within and outside their institutions. These studies underscore the role of mentoring in helping women advance in their careers and increase their chances of reaching leadership positions in higher education.

Kuntz and Livingston (2020) found that women identified a lack of mentors, a general scarcity of female mentors, and limited access to mentoring as challenges in their

professional paths. One participant even compared the lack of mentoring she received to what she perceived her male counterparts were benefiting from, feeling that this discrepancy in mentoring opportunities hindered her professional growth. Women's perceptions indicate an imbalance in both the quantity and quality of mentoring compared to their male counterparts.

2.9 SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Research highlights that women highly value various forms of support. According to Montas-Hunter (2019), participants place great importance on receiving encouragement and advice from a network of individuals, including supervisors, educators, family members, and friends, who serve as sources of positive influence and inspiration. In Kamassah's (2010) study involving South Asian and African women leaders, participants were asked to identify individuals who had influenced or inspired them. They frequently mentioned current and former supervisors who demonstrated a genuine interest in their personal lives and had faith in their potential for success. For instance, one participant shared how her supervisor had taken a personal interest in her professional development, encouraging her to attend conferences and introducing her to individuals in leadership positions on her campus. Montas-Hunter's (2019) research consistently emphasised the constructive impact of positive reinforcement, especially through verbal persuasion.

In addition to supervisor support, women identified family support as a significant factor in their success. Both Montas-Hunter's (2019) and Kamassah's (2010) studies revealed that families, particularly mothers and husbands, played a crucial role in providing support during challenging times. Gill and Jones' (2013) study also found that some participants attributed their attainment of presidential positions to the support and encouragement they received from their husbands. These women's experiences align with the advice from seasoned women leaders in higher education, who recommend cultivating supportive relationships and selecting a partner carefully (Gerdes, 2003). Eddy's (2009) research further indicates that women place a strong emphasis on relationships, which significantly influence their leadership style. These relationships are embedded within the broader organisational environment, and women's experiences within these influential

relationships can either facilitate or impede their progress into leadership roles. Furthermore, the studies highlight the value of mentors and the potential adverse consequences of lacking such mentorship.

Participants in Gill and Jones' (2013) study acknowledged that their husbands' support and encouragement played a role in their attainment of presidential positions. These women's experiences aligned with the advice given by experienced women leaders in higher education, emphasising the importance of developing supportive relationships and being picky about who you date (Gerdes, 2003). Furthermore, Eddy's (2009) study highlighted the importance of relationships with female leaders and how these influenced their leadership style. These relationships are part of the larger environment and can help or hinder women's advancement into leadership positions. Furthermore, participants in these studies emphasised the importance of mentors and the negative consequences of not having one.

2.10 WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Most studies mentioned above have investigated women's leadership development by examining women's career paths and the strategies they used along the way (Moody & Toni, 2017; Montas-Hunter, 2019; Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Brignoli, 2020; Kuntz & Livingston, 2020). Through their examination of women in leadership roles and those aspiring to attain such positions, these researchers have enriched our understanding of the development of women's leadership.

2.11 LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

According to Miscenko, Guenter, and Day (2017), leader development is a process in which leaders gain relevant experiences, skills, behaviours, and knowledge over time. Strong research evidence supports the value and benefits of interventions in the development of leaders. Leadership development programs are recognised as one solution to the underrepresentation of women in leadership. Formal programs' goals and objectives include (a) increasing participants' competence as well as their confidence and self-perceived leadership potential (Offermann, Thomas, Lanzo, & Smith, 2020);

Burkinshaw and White (b) state that "fitting in and breaking down obvious barriers" (2017); or (c) identifying, training, and mentoring potential leaders, as well as providing networking and career goal setting opportunities (Fusarelli, Fusarelli, & Riddick, 2018).

2.11.1 HERS-SA

In the realm of higher education, scholars and practitioners in the field of human resources have initiated efforts to promote the advancement of women (Barnard, Rose, Dainty,& Hassan, 2021). One such initiative is the Women's Leadership Institute (WLI), a collaborative endeavour between the women's centre and the human resources department. This program, attended by 25 women annually, aims to create a diverse cohort encompassing various employee categories. Its primary emphasis is on fostering self-reflection and vicarious learning among participants.

In South Africa, there is a dedicated academy for the advancement and leadership development of women in the Higher Education sector. This academy advocates for and contributes to the career and leadership development of women employed in the higher education sector or via carefully crafted programs. This organisation works in partnership with Higher Education Institutions to support their gender equity agenda through their nomination of women to attend HERS-SA programs, posting vacancies on the HERS-SA website, and showcasing the achievements of women in their respective institutions … (HERS-SA, 2018).

Topics within the program encompass various topics, such as managing conflicting responsibilities, fostering collaboration, establishing partnerships, and assuming leadership roles at different organisational levels (Aboufadel, 2020). Participants have reported positive results stemming from the program, which include increased self-assurance, expanded networking prospects, and the acquisition of knowledge through indirect learning experiences (Aboufadel, 2020). Furthermore, program attendees have expressed a keen interest in utilizing their newfound skills and insights, as well as a strong desire to engage in activities related to equity and diversity awareness and formal mentorship opportunities (Aboufadel, 2020).

The literature on formal leadership programs also highlights additional beneficial outcomes, such as the establishment of valuable networking relationships and platforms for women to collaborate, connect with like-minded peers, advocate for change, and receive structured support (Mathews, 2018). These leadership initiatives follow an experiential, reflective, and goal-oriented approach designed to enhance competencies, skills, and the creation of a supportive network. Although such programs significantly broaden networking opportunities, there is currently a lack of research examining their long-term impact. Leadership development programs play a pivotal role in helping women refine their aspirations and provide them with the tools and expertise needed to achieve their goals, addressing previous challenges women have faced in this regard (Burkinshaw & White, 2017).

HERS-SA operates on the belief that creating a women-exclusive environment is valuable for the exploration of professional issues within the context of the gendered power structures present in higher education. While leadership and hierarchical positions are not necessarily synonymous, these developmental programs primarily aim to increase the number of women in senior leadership roles. The underlying rationale for this approach acknowledges the necessity of visible gender-related changes within the patriarchal core of institutions and underscores the significance of role models. Role models not only attract attention but also provide examples for others to follow, reinforcing the modelled role.

The HERS-SA approach aligns with various strategies for achieving gender equity identified by Ely and Meyerson (2000: 103-51). It involves addressing the need to overcome gender-specific societal constraints placed on women and providing training to prepare them for senior positions better. Beyond this, HERS-SA's professional development philosophy reflects a strong understanding of the higher education environment from a radical feminist perspective. It emphasises the importance of providing women with safe spaces away from male-dominated power dynamics, as women often underestimate the power of networking and its role in maintaining the

patriarchal atmosphere. The overall program's goal is to boost personal and professional confidence, enabling women to challenge the gendered climate in their institutions and overcome any figurative glass ceilings that might hinder their progression to the highest echelons of academia. Participant recruitment follows a process known for its potential difficulties and costliness, and it remains a topic of ongoing debate (Krueger & Casey, 2019).

2.12 WOMEN'S IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

While research on leadership development programs for women acknowledges certain specific requirements related to women in leadership roles, the focus on identity development is not as prominent as other aspects. Additionally, although women's identity development has an impact on their experiences, studies concerning the support and challenges encountered by women in leadership positions within higher education often highlight significant identity traits that women bring to leadership, like their role as primary caregivers. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable absence of explicit discourse on the process of women's identity development and how this development may affect their leadership experiences.

Kailiti (2018) identified a disparity between women's development as characterised in literature and women's development as they experienced it, which helped to challenge the notion that women were underdeveloped in comparison to men. Moodly (2015) and Moodly and Toni (2015; 2017) argue that there is a need for women as role models in higher education leadership, citing equity and social justice as justifications. This necessitates a reimagining of leadership as part of the transformation process by introducing women's leadership styles into the leadership space.

2.13 IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEXT

According to Gill and Jones's (2013) research, the women who attained presidential positions acknowledged that their husbands' encouragement and support played a role in their success. These women's experiences matched the advice provided by experienced women leaders in higher education, which emphasises the importance of

developing supportive relationships and choosing a partner carefully (Gerdes, 2003). Eddy's (2009) study also demonstrated that relationships are significant to women leaders, influencing their leadership style. These relationships are a part of the wider environment and can either help or hinder women's progress in leadership roles. In addition, the participants in these studies stressed the value of having mentors and the negative consequences of lacking one.

Past studies have established variations in the institutional environment, opportunities for leadership development, and the level of support have a significant impact on career outcomes (Rosado-Solomon, 2017). Despite the attention scholars have given to individual and environmental factors shaping women's experiences in leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007), there remains a need for additional research that combines the analysis of personal experiences with their broader context. Research on women's identity development has shed light on the unique career challenges encountered by those who serve as primary caregivers. It has also highlighted the developmental impact of societal gender role expectations, as well as the conflicts that may arise when women are expected to balance the demands of both motherhood and careers.

2.14 RESEARCH ON WOMEN AS LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Numerous studies have employed in-depth interviews to gain profound insights into women's experiences, revealing the pivotal role of family, mentoring, and support in women's career development (Liani, Nyamongo & Tolhurst, 2020; Ramnund-Mansingh, & Seedat-Khan, 2020). According to Lian et al. (2020), several factors come into play when women decide to pursue leadership roles, encompassing their interests, educational background, available opportunities, and encountered barriers. Certain researchers (Hill & Wheat, 2017; Goerisch, Basiliere, Rosener, McKee, Hunt & Parker, 2019; Janes, Carter & Rourke, 2020) who have delved into the experiences of women who reached senior positions have shared strategies for surmounting the challenges they encountered. Their retrospective accounts and current reflections offer valuable insights into women's journeys in leadership positions within academic institutions. These studies

notably underscore the significance of mentorship, including the proactive changes women can make in their behaviour and relationships.

While scholars acknowledge that workplace gender equality barriers are often deeply rooted in cultural, environmental, and systemic factors, researchers like Shapiro and Kato (2021) and Schmidt and Graversen (2020) propose solutions for systemic change through gender equity initiatives, complemented by comprehensive strategies supporting work-life balance. Some proponents argue that once women achieve equal representation, they can work to change the system from within. However, it is important to note that even with gender parity, stereotypes and biases may persist and hinder equal treatment. Therefore, future research should explore strategies for mitigating the adverse effects of stereotypes on all marginalised and oppressed groups (Moodly & Toni, 2015).

Leadership development programs have the potential to address certain barriers that contribute to occupational segregation in senior-level leadership (Moodly & Toni, 2015. Nevertheless, because these programs tend to be exclusive, many women remain underrepresented in research (Moodly & Toni, 2015). A comparative study of a leadership development program could significantly contribute to the existing body of research. While extensive research has been conducted on women who have successfully attained senior-level leadership positions, relatively little attention has been paid to women in mid-level non-academic roles and their strategies for advancement. Some administrators progress through the ranks via non-academic roles or within student affairs, making it crucial to understand this specific career path (Croucher & Woelert, 2021). Advising women to emulate the strategies and behaviours of others who have achieved success is valuable in terms of career advancement best practices, but it does not fully account for institutional or attitudinal barriers maintained by those in control of the means of advancement. Despite this valuable information, the stories of women who aspired to attain senior-level leadership positions in higher education but did not succeed remain largely untold. Understanding the leadership experiences of women in mid-level positions is vital. It will provide insight into how women decide whether to pursue senior-level leadership roles.

2.14.1 Women as leaders in higher education institutions in South Africa

In a study conducted in South Africa, Moodly and Toni (2019) describe the experiences of women leaders in higher education institutions. In South Africa, women leaders experience silencing of their voices, and exclusion from a strong network of male leadership and dominance (Moodly & Toni, 2019). In addition, women in senior leadership positions in South Africa do experience opposing cultural and psychological factors that ought to be addressed within the structures of higher education institutions (Moodly & Toni, 2017). Expanding on the issue of an opposing culture to women leadership, Schreiber and Zinn (2023) explain that the culture within higher education institutions in South Africa ought to change to a more equitable, pluralistic and inclusive culture that fosters female leadership. A culture that is more inclusive will enable the role modelling of women's leadership in higher education institutions (Moodly & Toni, 2017). Although it is critical to have female role models that support a culture of positive female leadership experiences in higher education institutions, the absence of female role models to support this culture creates a cyclical negative experience for female executives in higher education institutions (Moodly & Toni, 2017). Noteworthy, it is critical for women who are in leadership positions to cope with patriarchal cultures and be in positions to transform such cultures (Seale et al., 2021). The ability to cope with and transform the culture in higher education institutions can be achieved through leadership development for women, in which most female leaders in higher education institutions are enthusiastic to participate (Seale et al. 2021).

The comprehensive review of the literature in this chapter has provided many insights into the experiences of women who have overcome obstacles, received support, and leveraged opportunities to ascend to senior-level leadership roles. These women's perspectives offer valuable guidance to aspiring senior leaders. The framework employed in this thesis draws from Critical Mass theory, Feminist theory, and Bronfenbrenner theory, guiding data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

2.15 KALEIDOSCOPE CAREER MODEL

One of my study objectives was to create a career framework for non-academic women in middle management, so I investigated career models that prioritise gender equity in the workplace. Due to the inadequacy of Western models and frameworks in capturing the lived experiences of African women, contemporary female researchers have crafted context-specific models designed to offer these women a platform for genuine expression and representation (Bostock, 2014; Ogbogu & Bisiriyu, 2012). Feminist critiques, as exemplified by Blustein, McWhirter, and Perry (2005), have voiced analogous concerns regarding the applicability and sufficiency of existing career development models and theories in addressing the challenges of an oppressed and marginalised world.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model is one career model that prioritises gender in the framework (KCM) (Elley-Brown, 2020; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). It was developed to comprehend why women "opt-out" of the leadership maze and do not aspire to top positions in organisations. The project had a broad scope, with various methods (five different studies, including interviews, focus groups, and three surveys) used to better understand women's career experiences (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006).

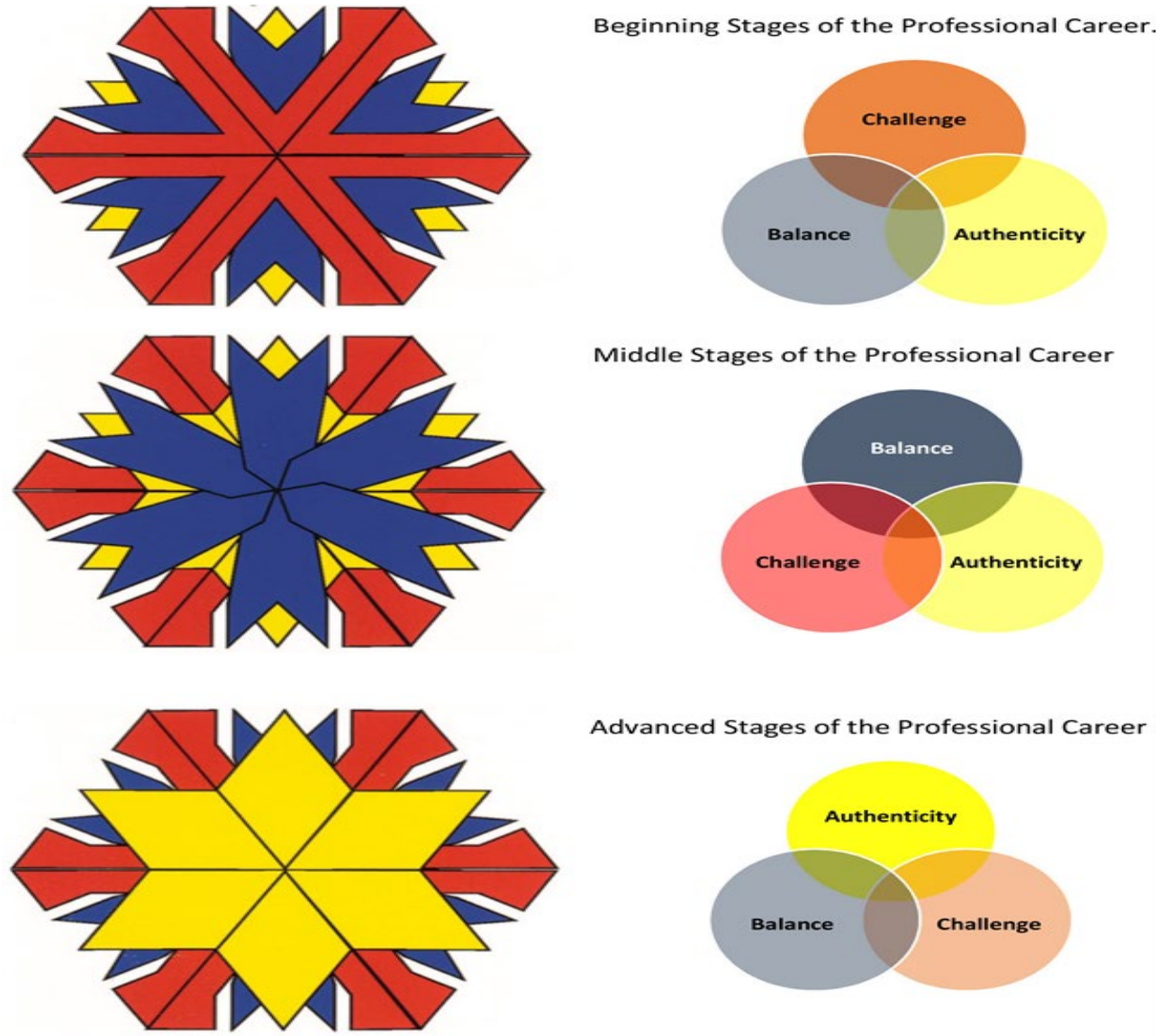

Figure 3: Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006)

According to the kaleidoscope metaphor, women attempt to realign their career patterns by rotating several components of their lives to meet the demands of new roles and responsibilities. (Elley-Brown, 2020; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). The three mirrors of the kaleidoscope are related to the parameters or motivators of a career by these authors: authenticity ('can I be myself in the midst of all of this and still be authentic?'); balance ('if I make this career decision, can I balance the parts of my life well so that there can be a coherent whole?'); and challenge ('will I be sufficiently challenged if I accept this career option?'). They argue that, over time, the most relevant career may be challenging, balanced, or authentic. Other career parameters fade in intensity, like how specific

colours fade to the background of a kaleidoscope, but they remain present in the individual's life and career (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). As a result, the KCM's central tenet is the need to understand and implement career choices while reconciling potential conflicts.

I believe that the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) can be a valuable framework for women in middle management in higher education to develop and advance their careers. Here is how the KCM can help women in this situation:

- **Authenticity:**
  - Encourage female middle-management professionals to pursue their actual career goals, values, and passions.
  -Make self-reflection and assessment opportunities available to assist them in aligning their career choices with their true selves.
  - Provide women with resources and encouragement to pursue personally meaningful and fulfilling career paths.
- **Balance**:
- Recognise the difficulties women in middle management face in balancing work and life.
- Flexible work schedules, family-friendly policies, and wellness programs are examples of resources and support systems that promote work-life balance.
- Encourage women to prioritise self-care and set boundaries to avoid burnout.
- **Challenge**:
- Provide customised professional development programs for women in middle management.
- Provide opportunities for skill development, leadership development, and exposure to new responsibilities.
- Encourage women to take on challenging projects, cross-functional assignments, and roles that require them to expand their expertise and visibility.

According to my analysis, by implementing the principles of the Kaleidoscope Career Model, institutions can create a supportive and empowering environment for women in middle management in higher education (Ashraf, 2022). This framework encourages authenticity, work-life balance, growth opportunities, integration of diverse identities, and awareness of intersectional challenges. It enables women to pursue meaningful careers while promoting their professional and personal well-being. According to my analysis, by implementing the principles of the Kaleidoscope Career Model, institutions can create a supportive and empowering environment for women in middle management in higher education.

2.16 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I introduced three theoretical frameworks: Feminist theory, Critical Mass theory, and Bronfenbrenner theory. Alongside these frameworks, I also introduced the Kaleidoscope career model as a relevant model that places a strong emphasis on promoting gender equity in the workplace. The literature review delved into women's career experiences in higher education, their experiences as leaders, women's roles in higher education with a focus on career development, gender roles and career expectations, and the development of leadership identity. The methodology employed for this study, as outlined in Chapter 3, was guided by these theoretical frameworks. It followed the Grounded Theory (GT) method, which I describe in detail in that chapter. This methodology encompassed various aspects, including data collection, analysis, and the specific GT procedures employed.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will first introduce my research approach, namely qualitative research. I will then discuss the tools used to collect and analyse the data. Thirdly, I examine the research demographic, analytical framework, and data processing techniques I employed. Fourthly, I will describe the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) I utilised for data analysis and model-building. Finally, I will discuss the ethical issues I considered while conducting the research. In this study, I opted for a theoretical framework and methodology that prioritises the participants' voices and aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of women's leadership experiences in higher education. This was motivated by the call to develop more empowering approaches to generating knowledge (Lather, 1986; Plumer & Young, 2010). It is also inspired by some scholars who have engaged in deep, sustained, and ground-breaking studies of women's development (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldeberger & Tarule, 1986; Josselson, 1996; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Kele & Pieterson, 2015).

The study process is visually summarised in Figure 4, followed by an explanation of each component.

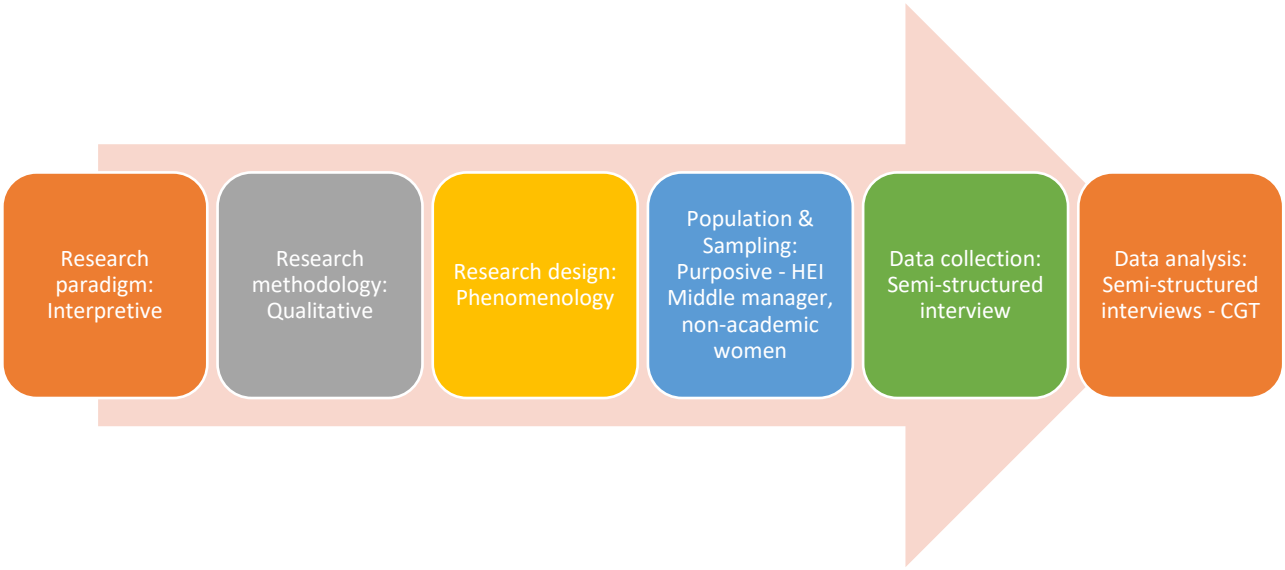

Figure 4: Research Methodology Framework (Researcher)

The study took a phenomenological research design and applied a qualitative research methodology. Its population of interest was middle-level non-academic managers in South African higher education institutions. From these, a purposive sample of 20 participants was drawn. Data was collected from this sample using semi-structured interviews, and CGT was used for data analysis. The following section focuses on the research design chosen for the study.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design acts as a strategy for reaching the study's goals and answering its central question while considering the time, money, and other resources that can be used (Babbie, 2020; Brennen, 2022). My study's design was based on a phenomenological methodology, emphasising that understanding study subjects' points of view is essential because phenomenology emphasises that social reality is socially constructed (Aspers, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy as an effort to accurately capture an experience by the observer without imposing explanations or previous beliefs (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020). Creswell and Creswell (2018) assert that phenomenology aims to move from appearances to the truth by capturing specific people's lived experiences.

The study's research questions and objectives centred on understanding the career advancement and progression life scenarios of middle management non-academic women in South African HEIs in their quest and desire to reach seniority, which necessitated this specific design. In order to meet the objectives of my study, I used phenomenology to investigate their life stories and experiences.

3.3 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENTIFIC BELIEFS

Determining the research paradigm at the commencement of the study design is essential since it provides a framework for conducting research (Kumar, 2020). Interpretivism is the common philosophical foundation for qualitative research. It is founded on the idea that social reality is subjectively moulded by people's perceptions and experiences rather than being objective (Atieno, 2009; Collis & Hussey, 2014). A research paradigm has four core

elements, also referred to as assumptions. These are ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology (Ryan, 2018). Table 4 summarises these assumptions by paradigm.

Table 1: Positivism versus Interpretivism

Philosophical Assumptions	Positivism	Social Constructivism
Ontological: what constitutes valid knowledge	Reality is objective, singular and separate from the researcher	Reality is subjective and multiple and informed by participants' perceptions
Epistemological: what constitutes valid knowledge	Researcher is independent of what is being researched	Researcher interacts with what is being researched
Axiological: the role of values	Research is value-free and unbiased.	Researcher acknowledges that research is value-laden and biases are present.
Rhetorical: the language used in the research	Researcher writes in a formal style and uses the passive voice, accepts quantitative words and sets definitions.	Researcher writes in a less formal style and uses personal voices, accepted qualitative terms and limited definitions
Methodological: the process of research	• Process is deductive • Study of cause and effect with a static design (categories are isolated beforehand) • Research is context-free • Generalisations lead to prediction, explanation and understanding • Results are accurate and reliable through validity and reliability	• Process is inductive • Study of mutual simultaneous shaping of factors with an emerging design (categories are identified during the process) • Research is context-bound • Patterns and theories are developed for understanding • Findings are accurate and reliable through verification

Source: (Collins and Hussey, 2009:58).

a) **Ontological assumptions:** Ontological presumptions focus on the nature of reality (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2018). The main ontological question in research is what reality is (Babbie, 2020). Interpretivists believe in multiple realities, while positivists are grounded in the existence of a single reality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In other words, among interpretivists, there is no single perspective or outcome related to a subject matter. This study acknowledges that there are multiple versions of reality based on the unique experiences of the participants as well as the subjectivity of those perceptions and experiences.

b) **Epistemological assumptions:** Epistemology is a philosophical branch dealing with knowledge generation (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). Epistemologically, positivists believe that knowledge is generated through objective means (Hennink, et al., 2020). Therefore, the researcher should be independent of the knowledge generation means and must maintain a neutral stance when engaging participants. Interpretivists, on the other hand, consider knowledge to be subjective. The researcher is not an independent party in knowledge creation. Their subjective views based on experiences, beliefs and perceptions can affect this created knowledge (Babbie, 2020). I took the interpretive epistemology, which accepts the researcher's involvement in the process and research participant subjectivity (Ryan, 2018). This aligned more with the research's objectives of understanding personal experience narratives based on subjective views.

c) **Axiological assumptions:** Axiology is a philosophical branch focusing on values, ethics and morals (Saunders, et al., 2019). In a research paradigm, axiological issues of concern are the acceptable values that a researcher takes in the execution of the study (Brennen, 2022). My own biases and values were reflected in the study. Because I am a Black woman with non-academic mid-level leadership experience, I had a personal and intellectual commitment to the research topic. This situation was acceptable under an interpretive paradigm due to its acceptance that researcher values can influence the direction of a study, although personal biases need to be controlled.

d) **Methodological assumptions:** In line with the interpretive paradigm, I used a qualitative methodology to study a small sample of non-academic women in mid-level leadership positions (Borcsa & Willig, 2022). Their experiences revealed patterns and categories through data analysis. The information gathered during the interviews is represented in the conclusions.

The research methods that applied to the study under this interpretive paradigm are further discussed in the next section.

3.4 RESEARCH METHOD

There is a growing understanding of the value of qualitative methods in the social sciences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), even though both quantitative and qualitative research methods can be used depending on the research objectives (Atieno, 2009; Collis & Hussey, 2014; Bell et al., 2018). Qualitative approaches provide benefits such as supplying knowledge already there, aiding a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied, and enabling rich, contextualised descriptions (Babbie, 2020).

Three essential elements of qualitative research are data collection, data analysis, arrangement, and reporting (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The information for qualitative research can be obtained in various ways, and the final report can be either vocal or written (Bell, et al., 2018). Subsequent sections of this chapter will go through the specifics of how I handled these components of this study.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have value, yet neither has a clear advantage over the other (Atieno, 2009; Ghauri, Grhaug & Stranger, 2020). This is vital to understand. The study question at hand determines which approach should be used. When choosing the best approach for the study, I was guided by the research question. **Table 2** gives an overview of the differences in emphasis between qualitative and quantitative methods.

Table 2: Differences in emphasis between qualitative and quantitative methods

Qualitative methods	**Quantitative methods**
Emphasis on understanding	Emphasis on testing and verification
Focus on understanding from participant's/informants' point of view	Focus on facts and/or reasons for social events
Interpretation and rational approach	Logical and critical approach
Observations and measurements in natural settings	Controlled measurements
Subjective "insider view" and closeness to data	Objective "outsider view" distant from data
Explorative orientation	Hypothetical-deductive; focus on hypothesis testing
Process-oriented	Results-oriented
Holistic perspective	Particularistic and analytical
Generalisation by comparison of properties and contexts of individual organism	Generalisation by population membership

Source: (Collins and Hussey, 2009:58)

The desire to capture the subjective perspectives of non-academic middle-level female leaders on their workplace experiences drove my decision to use qualitative methods in this study.

3.5 POPULATION, SAMPLING STRATEGY, AND SAMPLE SIZE

In this section, I discuss the population, sampling strategy and sample size that were applied in the study. This was guided by literature.

3.5.1 Study population

In this context, the population refers to the entire set of factors from which conclusions must be drawn (Saunders, et al., 2019). This study's population consists of all non-academic women in South African HEIs. For this study, these women are in positions that oversee a significant functional area with institution-wide scope and impact. These women also oversee the work of other professional employees and report to a top executive officer or other senior institutional leaders. These were considered women non-academic middle-level leaders over the previous five years. All the women in the target population held middle-management positions in HEI. Because of the size of these groups, it was not easy to identify and include every member. As a result, only non-academic women who have completed HERS-SA are included.

3.5.2 Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling—specifically judgmental sampling—was used to ensure that the participants in this study met the requirement of being non-academic women in middle management roles at HEIs in South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of women of all races who had held non-academic middle-management positions over the previous five years. I was granted permission to contact the HERS-SA alumni database. The identified potential participants using judgmental sampling as all members are from HEIs provided by the alumnus.

The sample is referred to as the unit of analysis in qualitative research (Cooper & Schindler, 2003), which allows the researcher to inquire about the subject of the study.

The sample size was designed to include at least one woman from each race. The final sample included 20 women from various SA HEIs. Please refer to Chapter 4 of the thesis for more information on the sample's composition. The sample composition is depicted in **Table 3** below.

Table 3: Target sample

Middle-management non-academic HERS-SA graduates	**African**	**Coloured**	**Indian**	**White**	**Total**
	11	3	3	3	**20**

3.6 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

For this phenomenological study, interviews were chosen as the mode of data collection to capture participant insights into their lived experiences (Quinney, Dwyer, & Chapman, 2016). Additionally, focus groups, ethnography, sociometry, unobtrusive measures, historiography, and case studies are just a few of the techniques that can be used to collect qualitative data (Berg, 1998).

Interviews entail conversing with selected individuals and questioning their thoughts, emotions, and behaviour (Byrne, Brugha, Clarke, Lavelle, & McGarvey, 2015; Collis & Hussey, 2014). This allowed me to delve deeper into the participants' perspectives, making them particularly suitable for research that examines opinions and values (Bryne et al., 2015; Quinney et al., 2016).

Interviews are classified into three types: semi-structured, unstructured, and structured (Berg, 1998; Collis & Hussey, 2014; Hennink et al., 2022). Structured interviews, frequently labelled as positivist, typically consist of a predetermined series of questions with predetermined responses or response categories (Babbie, 2020). Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, allow participants to express themselves freely without regard for a predetermined structure (Babbie, 2020). Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. They provide a guided but flexible approach, with pre-determined subjects, sample sizes, and participants, while allowing for open-ended inquiries and the opportunity to explore and ask clarifying questions (Collis & Hussey, 2014; Hennink et al.,

2022). The goal of these two types of interviews, associated with interpretivist methodology, is to elicit participants' vivid and genuine narratives.

To build rapport with participants, I created a comfortable and private interview environment (Harvey, 2010; Quinney et al., 2016). Participants were asked for their permission before taking notes or recording the interview for transcription. Awareness of potential interviewer bias is critical, especially in qualitative studies. This prejudice can be reduced by ensuring that respondents understand the questions posed to them and their responses (Collis & Hussey, 2014).

I used in-depth one-on-one virtual interviews to collect data for this study. Interviews are methods of maintaining and generating conversations with people about a specific topic or set of topics. An interview, according to Bryman (2012), is an oral communication between the interrogator and the respondent. They are also defined as "in-person encounters between the researcher and informants aimed at understanding the informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words" (Creswell, 2018, 179). Interviews are recommended due to their capacity to provide an abundance of information, often surpassing the specific inquiries made by the researcher. Participants have the freedom to articulate their thoughts using their own expressions and delve into extensive details, making interviews particularly well-suited for grounded theory development. (Brace, 2018; Burawoy, 2017). Furthermore, using the participants' words provides more insight into their worldview, especially since the entire exercise is about understanding the participants' experiences and the meaning they make of those experiences (Leavy, 2017).

Table 4: The advantages and disadvantages of using interviews as a data collection method

Advantages of Personal Interviews	Disadvantages of Personal Interviews
Good cooperation from respondents	High costs of getting to respondents
The interviewer can answer questions about the study, probe for answers, use follow-up and gather information by observation.	Not all respondents are available at a mutually suitable time for both the researcher and the participant.

Interviewer can pre-screen respondents to ensure that they fit the population profile.	Longer time in the field gathering the data
Responses can be entered onto a computer to reduce error	Follow-up is labour-intensive

Table 4 lists the advantages and disadvantages of using personal interviews as a data collection method. This guided the final data collection selection choice for the study. The leading advantages were better possibilities of rapport between the interviewees and the researcher (Babbie, 2020); the ability to probe interviewees to gain further insight into their respective perspectives (Kumar, 2020) and the ability to augment one's understanding through observing the interviewees' non-verbal cues and their environment (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2020).

Because one-on-one interactions help establish rapport, conducting personal interviews allowed for good cooperation from respondents (Babbie, 2020). It also provided the opportunity to probe further and ask additional questions when necessary, ensuring a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives (Borcsa & Willig, 2022). However, one difficulty encountered was scheduling interviews around the availability of participants. Due to the work obligations of participants, I had to reschedule some events several times. Individuals' one-on-one interviews lasted varying amounts of time, taking up a significant amount of time. The load-shedding issue in South Africa has had a significant impact, as some interviews had to be rescheduled due to planned and unplanned power outages.

Rather than using computer software, I hand-transcribed and examined the data for data analysis. The supervisor suggested this strategy to ensure a deep immersion in the data, allowing for multiple listens to the interviews and improved memory. Manual analysis was deemed appropriate for a beginning researcher because it assisted me in remembering more specifics and made it easier to connect quotes to findings when writing (Webb, 1999). Mattimoe, Hayden, Murphy and Ballantine (2021) found views that in some studies, qualitative data analysis software-imposed codes and code groups in a manner that affected findings. This assertion was also considered in using a manual data analysis approach. Mattimoe et al. (2021) also found that manual qualitative data analysis was

highly feasible when dealing with low-volume data. This was the case with this study. It had 20 transcripts that could be handled through manual qualitative data analysis.

Only three respondents required additional information following the interview process to clarify their understanding of the provided questions. As a result, participant follow-up was minimal.

3.6.1 Methodological challenges of interviewing colleagues

As a junior researcher conducting PhD research, this was my first encounter with women managers. Some of these women held managerial roles or were in positions of power, which fit the definition of "elite", as stated by Harvey (2010) and Kvale (2011). Harvey (2010) provides insightful advice on interviewing elites that applies to all interviews, regardless of the participants' social standing, and not just those with this group. In Harvey's study, elites are defined or classified as persons who possess significant power and influence due to organisational position seniority. As Harvey notes, elites may find it unusual or less acceptable to be questioned and led by someone they consider relatively junior in terms of organisational power and professional accomplishment (Harvey, 2010). On the other hand, researchers would require such people to open up and express themselves fully, and the power balance perspectives could limit the researcher's inquisitiveness, reducing the insight of findings. On the other hand, it could also constrain the elite interviewee's openness, affecting interview outcomes (Harvey, 2010).

I followed Harvey's suggestions to ensure that our interactions were fruitful. I needed to plan ahead of time when reaching out for responses, attending interviews, and being well-prepared for each encounter. To avoid research fatigue, I also avoided speaking with people who had previously participated in studies with a similar focus. Communication with participants and any gatekeepers necessitated a thorough explanation of the meeting's purpose and the study's objectives. This was typically accomplished by sending an introductory email that included information about myself, the institution I represented, the purpose of the study, how the data would be shared, and the confidentiality of the data.

It was critical to become familiar with the interview questions and their position in the interviewing guide to avoid duplication or redundancy. I also did background research on the elite participants to avoid asking questions that could be answered by looking at other data sources.

Contact with participants before and during the interview strongly emphasised transparency and trust because these qualities facilitated honest and open responses, as advised by Harvey (2010). Throughout the research process, it was critical to interact with each participant with professionalism and high standards. Other factors to consider when questioning elites were tactfully handling power relationships and acknowledging their habit of being in charge.

I dressed formally for each interview and ensured that I was adequately prepared based on Harvey's suggestions to establish a professional tone and create the appropriate ambience. Fortunately, there were no power struggles during the interviews because the participants let me lead the discussions. In my opinion, all of the participants were professional and considerate of my study and research procedure.

3.6.2 Interview schedule design

I used a semi-structured approach with probing questions to elicit additional information about the topics raised by the participants. The interviews were divided into five general categories based on the interview schedule listed in ***Appendix 2***:

Experiences in the workplace: Participants were asked to discuss their professional backgrounds, including the companies they worked for and the positions they held. They were also asked to discuss their professional accomplishments, challenges, and the lessons they had learned from both good and bad events. The participants were asked how much assistance or resistance they received from various organisations throughout their careers.

Career progression questions: These dominated the conversation throughout the interview—their professional paths and how they came to hold their current positions.

Organisational dynamics: The participants were asked about workplace dynamics, specifically race and gender. Because these are common issues for women in the workplace, the interview also covered their experiences, career goals, and HEI support.

Understanding oneself and the lessons learned throughout one's profession: The last part of the interview schedule required reflection on the lessons learned throughout one's career. The theoretical foundation for career strategies for non-academic women in HEIs was derived from this part.

By structuring the interviews around these categories, I gathered detailed information about the participants' personal backgrounds, professional experiences, leadership roles, organisational dynamics, and self-reflection on their career journeys.

3.6.3 Data gathering process

During the data collection procedure, I gained the flexibility to consider the participants' preferences when selecting meeting times. Participants had to reschedule appointments occasionally, so I had to work around their schedules and family obligations. I also recognised the importance of interview deadlines after several sessions ran over and left me exhausted.

Before each session, participants were required to sign a consent form authorising the audio recording. The form was emailed at least two days before the interview. I mentioned that if I used a recording device, I would be able to concentrate on the conversation while also creating an audit trail of the data gathered. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer questions or stop the interview at any time. None of the participants backed out, and everyone agreed to the recording.

To establish trust, I introduced myself and discussed the study's objectives, emphasising privacy and using pseudonyms. Throughout the interviews, I used my discretion to determine whether to pursue sensitive lines of inquiry in order to obtain more specific answers. Following each interview, I kept a journal in which I recorded observations as well as those revealed by the participants. These actions were about Kumar’s (2020) and

Brennen's (2022) views of guaranteeing anonymity and avoiding sensitive questions when conducting interviews.

After thanking them for their time and assuring them of their anonymity, I gave them the opportunity to express any additional ideas or remarks. I kept a research notebook throughout the project for debriefing and bias management. Some interviews were extremely taxing when participants discussed their difficult life experiences. More extended interviews resulted from some participants' familiarity, which aided in quickly establishing trust. Surprisingly, there was no need to gain strangers' trust. The above actions were guided by the advice of DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2020), Kumar (2020) and Hennink et al. (2022).

Finally, the first interviews assisted the researcher in improving the interviewing tool and provided helpful input for the fieldwork. I changed the interview schedule, scheduled participant interviews, ensured the recording equipment worked, and kept meeting times flexible. Interviews were recorded, consent forms were emailed and signed, and a research diary was kept to document participants' experiences and observations.

Preparing for the field: In my initial research proposal, I planned to conduct the study at three universities in the City of Tshwane: Tshwane University of Technology, University of Pretoria, and University of South Africa. However, as I worked on the methodology chapter, I realised that my data collection would be enriched by including participants from various institutors across South Africa, as they had different experiences due to their varied institutional environments. The other consideration was that it would be a challenge to conduct face-to-face interviews with participants from different geographical locations, leading to the decision to conduct all interviews virtually.

Following permission from the SBL Research Ethics Committee to collect data, I contacted HERS-SA (paragraph 2.11.1) management to request permission to interview alumni from their database. I was granted a formal permission letter to contact women in the HERS-SA database. (See Annexure 1).

The database contains names of HERS-SA alumni who have granted permission to HERS-SA to display their names and contact details accessible from their web pages. I compiled my list of possible participants by analysing their profiles that matched the description of suitable candidates for my research.

After compiling a list of potential interviewees, I contacted them via various channels, including phone, email, and MS Teams. I was initially hesitant to interview people I knew on a social level because I was concerned that the social dynamics would distract from the interview process. Relying on McDermid, Peters, Jackson and Daly (2019) on conducting interviews among one's work peers, I took the view that I needed to take a single role of a researcher rather than play a dual role, which involved being both a researcher and a workmate. In this view, I had to conduct myself like an external person who was not related to anyone in the organisation. All the ethical principles of research were applied to the participants regardless of knowing the participants at a personal level. Secondly, as McDermid et al. (2019) recommend, I needed to clear any preconceptions about how the participants could respond. Also, I needed to strongly emphasise confidentiality and anonymity as familiarity with participants was feared to increase risks with unauthorised disclosures of their information (McDermid et al. (2019). As an additional measure, I offered the participants an opportunity to review the transcripts of our interviews. This was to ensure that the interviews would reflect their views rather than any potential biases and preconceptions associated with the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Brennen, 2022).

After conducting a pilot study with a colleague, it became clear that I could conduct interviews successfully if I set a professional tone from the start.

Three of the targeted participants were women I had previously worked with, and I had direct access to their contact information. This was advantageous because I had worked with them professionally during our time together. As a result, I did not have to deal with gatekeepers to contact them (Bryne et al., 2015). However, Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that special considerations should be given when recruiting participants known to a researcher for a study.

Piloting data gathering. I conducted a pilot interview with a colleague at my university with the purpose of evaluating the suitability of the existing research instrument, gathering feedback on the interview schedule, addressing any ambiguities in the questions, and identifying opportunities to streamline or expand the set of questions. This approach was in line with the recommendations of scholars such as Saunders et al. (2019) and Kumar (2020). Additionally, the pilot interview allowed me to become familiar with the nuances of conducting virtual interviews, detect and rectify any emotionally charged or compound questions, and estimate the time required for each interview. The pilot interview was scheduled for a Sunday afternoon because it was the only available time for the participant, given her managerial responsibilities. The insights gained from the pilot interview were integrated into the study's findings as they provided valuable perspectives.

The pilot interview taught me a lot about how to conduct fieldwork in the future. Firstly, I was able to test and learn more about behaving like an external researcher, even among participants I know. Also, I understood that the interview process needed to be streamlined and shorter. Also, after the pilot study, I understood the need to emphasise to the participants that I was coming in as an independent researcher, and our interactions were highlighted as confidential and had to be professional.

Before the interview, testing the connectivity and recording techniques on MS Teams to ensure proper operation was also critical. It was noted that neither the connectivity nor the recording techniques were problematic.

After adjusting the interview schedule, I began scheduling interviews with the participants. I contacted potential participants via cell phone, email, and MS Teams. We scheduled the interviews at times that were convenient for each participant. In cases where it was necessary, I introduced myself, explained the purpose of my research, and clarified what I required from them. I provided them with the necessary documents, such as UNISA confirmation of my student status and the consent form they needed to complete once their interest and willingness to participate were confirmed (Shenton, 2004). I also provided more specific information about the study.

The length of the interviews varied, with some lasting an hour and a half, and others lasting up to two hours. I used the MS Teams recording to record and transcribe the interviews. On the interview schedules, I made notes of crucial issues and backup copies of the recordings on the laptop.

I also informed the participants that follow-up interviews were possible if additional information not covered during the initial interview was required. I clarified that they could end the interview at any time if they no longer wanted to participate, as stated by Brennen (2022). I assured them that they could refuse to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. It is worth noting that all participants agreed to be recorded, and none of them dropped out until the study was finished. The conversations flowed naturally and unrehearsed because the participants had not had time to review the scripts before the interviews.

At the start of each interview, I introduced myself and attempted to establish rapport with the participants, especially those I met for the first time. I explained the study's purpose and assured participants of the confidentiality of their answers, as well as the university personnel's limited access to interview scripts and recordings. It was made clear that pseudonyms would be used, and the organisations for which they worked or had worked would not be disclosed in the final report, in accordance with Quinney et al. (2016) and Kumar (2020).

During the interviews, I used my discretion to decide whether to probe further for clarification in cases where the answers were unclear or too concise. Judging from participants' hesitancy to respond and body language, I also used caution when asking sensitive questions. During supervisory meetings, I discussed moments of quandary with my supervisor and shared my subjective experiences and those of the participants. To ensure accuracy, I documented my thoughts and feelings, as well as participant observations, in a research journal shortly after each interview, as recommended by Chan et al. (2013) and Quinney et al. (2013). (2016). Some interviews contained intense experiences, necessitating a few days of decompression and reflection before transcribing them.

At the end of each interview, I made a point of formally closing the session by informing the participant that the interview had concluded and thanking them for their time. I reiterated our discussion's confidentiality and assured them that neither they nor their institution would be identified in the study. I also allowed participants to share any additional thoughts or comments not covered by the interview questions.

During some of the interviews, participants became emotional when discussing their early life experiences. Seeing these strong and accomplished women's vulnerability was a powerful reminder that they were not immune to pain or tears despite their professional success and influential positions. It emphasised that these individuals, regardless of their leadership image, were human beings who felt and experienced emotions intensely.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

Data analysis is essential in the research process because it results in the findings (Flick,2022). It entails a methodical examination of the collected data to derive meaning from it (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Depending on the research paradigm and the nature of the data, the methods used for data analysis can be quantitative or qualitative (Collins and Hussey, 2014).

Collis and Hussey (2014) propose three essential steps, regardless of the data analysis approach used: data reduction, data restructuring, and decontextualisation. Data reduction entails systematically selecting relevant data, often through coding. Data restructuring is the process of organising data into meaningful categories.

Collis and Hussey (2014) propose three essential elements in data analysis:

- Understanding: This entails gaining an understanding of the research topic, setting, and cultural context before the start of the research. There is an ongoing debate about how much prior knowledge a researcher should have to conduct unbiased research free of preconceived ideas and theories.
- Synthesising: this entails identifying and extracting various elements from the data to derive meaningful insights, explanations, or conclusions about what is going on. Making connections and deriving insights from data is required.

- Theorising is the process of developing theories or theoretical frameworks based on data analysis. It aims to generate new knowledge and meaningful interpretations from the collected data.

Grounded theory, narrative analysis, thematic analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis, content analysis, and critical discourse analysis are all methods for analyzing qualitative data. Depending on the study's purpose, discipline, and research questions, these various methods can be used (Saunders, et al., 2019). I used Karmaz's constructivist grounded theory (CGT) for my study.

3.8 THE CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY

To analyse the data I gathered for the study, I used the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach. The original grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, is one of the most widely used methods for analyzing qualitative data (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2014). Charmaz (2006, 2014) is attributed to the CGT's development, which was a variation of the original GT by Glaser and Strauss. It also varied from independent GT versions by Glaser (also referred to as the Glaserian grounded theory and the Straussian grounded theory by Strauss. While the Glaserian GT was positivist, the Straussian GT was post-positivist. The former centred on a positivist viewpoint of research objectivity, emphasising that the researcher was independent and external to their research. The latter valued objectivity but accepted that while researchers could be independent of their studies, their subjective viewpoints could not be wholly separated from the study and, therefore, should be accommodated. Charmaz came up with the interpretive and constructivist versions. This supported and advocated for subjectivity, stressing that the researcher cannot be separated from their study. Charmaz's CGT hinges upon two main concepts – social constructivism and symbolic interactionalism. These are discussed in the next section.

3.8.1 Social constructivism

In grounded theory, social constructivism recognizes and respects the ongoing interaction between the researcher and the study subjects. It also acknowledges that the research and participants generate data alongside the research participants while participating in

the study (Finlay, 2021). Furthermore, social constructivism acknowledges that any theory derived from research is an interpretation based on the researcher's perspective (Charmaz, 2007). Specific requirements must be met for a study to be considered a constructivist grounded theory, according to Charmaz (2007).

The study adheres to the fundamental assumptions of CGT as captured in the works of Charmaz (2007, 2014) and Charmaz and Thornberg (2020) in the following ways:

- **Multiple Realities**: The study recognised the presence of various realities. It was noted that each participant's lived experience would be distinct from the others, emphasizing the diverse range of ideas and individual perspectives represented in the research.
- **Mutual Data Construction**: The study emphasizes the importance of mutual data construction, wherein face-to-face interactions with participants play a vital role in co-creating research data. This approach involves engaging with participants to generate information and insights collaboratively. The study recognizes and supports the concept of mutual data construction as a valuable method in the research process.
- **The Role of the Researcher in Category Construction**: The study underscores the significant role of the researcher in category construction. It highlights that the researcher is a crucial participant in the process, involving the examination and interpretation of collected data. Categories for the study were selected and developed through this active involvement. The data analysis section provides a detailed account of the procedure employed by the researcher in generating categories from the collected data.
- **The study acknowledged that data representation is problematic and situational**. The study recognizes the inherent challenges in data representation, acknowledging its problematic and situational nature. It emphasizes that the complexity, relativity, and insufficiency of data representation are accepted realities. The study also acknowledges the potential influence of the observer's values, priorities, positions, and actions on the interpretation and representation of facts. To mitigate subjectivity in data processing, the study took precautions to minimize bias and uphold objectivity.

In conclusion, the study aligns with its underlying assumptions by acknowledging multiple realities. It places emphasis on the mutual construction of data through interaction, recognizing the essential role of the researcher in category construction. Furthermore, the study acknowledges the subjectivity and situational nature of data representation, remaining consistent with its recognition of these complexities throughout the research process.

3.8.2 Data analysis procedures followed

Data analysis using CGT followed ten major steps suggested by Karmaz and Thornberg (2014), Charmaz (2014) and Finlay (2021). This subsection shows these steps. First, I defined each step according to the literature. Afterwards, I explained how I followed each step's procedures to ensure a trustworthy CGT.

Initial coding: This is the preliminary identification, marking and labelling of units of information that appear significant for addressing research questions (Finlay, 2021). In CGT, initial coding is open. Researchers can use extract codes that are not predetermined as part of the constructivist knowledge co-creation process (Charmaz, 2017). Codes can be labelled, marked or colour-coded (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

In this current study, I started with identifying open codes that seemed interesting in aiding the research's progression towards meeting its objectives. These codes included single words, phrases and lines. To extract the codes, I read through all the interview transcripts line-by-line.

Focused coding: Focused coding occurs after the initial data marking and labelling exercise that targets the identification of specific data categories that are of interest to the research objectives (Khanal, 2018). This involves further exploration of categories of interest (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). It, therefore, involves collating selected open codes into groups that resemble concepts or themes (Karmaz, 2014). Pieterse (2020) notes that categories should be unique and must not overlap. This view also holds for themes and subthemes created through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this current research, I grouped open codes of interest into related data categories, each directly related to one or more research questions. Several groups emerged, and

these were explored further through re-reading the transcripts and, at this point, selecting in vivo codes or participants' direct quotes that explained and or justified a category. Furthermore, the categories established in the study serve as foundational building blocks for themes that are integral to constructing a career development framework. This framework aims to elucidate the career trajectories of non-academic women toward senior leadership positions in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. Braun and Clarke (2014) assert that themes and subthemes represent data categories in grounded theory. In their view, this means that thematic analysis can support the CGT's theory development goal. This guided my use of themes and subthemes to depict data categories and subcategories from the dataset.

Theoretical Sampling: This is a process of purposively selecting participants who can add to co-create a suggested theoretical standpoint (Karmaz, 2014; Kamarz & Thornberg, 2020). In CGT, several theoretical sampling cycles can occur (Finlay, 2021). However, continual data collection sequences may not be needed contingent on the strength of the data collected in the initial stages in justifying the possible existence of a theoretical view that can be extracted from the data.

In this study, data was collected in one cycle. Because the 20 participants had provided data, I considered it adequate in co-constructing and supporting a theoretical view that could effectively answer the research questions. The interview processes were quite detailed, with some lasting for as long as two hours, creating a rich dataset from which theoretical sampling could be done. This meant that theoretical sampling was restricted to returning to the dataset to identify cases that supported and strengthened the views expressed in the information categories identified and developed using focused coding.

Specifically, theoretical sampling considered (Finlay, 2021):

- Selecting participants whose views highlighted the interconnectedness of categories
- Selecting participants whose views were required to saturate particular standpoints and arguments

- Looking for participants whose views could provide further insight into poorly answered research questions or build categories

To complete this process, I had to go back to all the transcripts, this time with a redefined goal of identifying cases for further analysis. Important identified cases that met all the above were P1, P4, P6 and P19.

Constant Comparison: Karmaz's (2011) CGT included constantly comparing new and old data sources. This helps find divergencies and similarities that can improve the researcher's understanding of concepts and categories of interest.

Theoretical Coding: This stage moves the thematic constructions in the focused coding stages into a theory-building procedure (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). The participants selected for further re-examination through the theoretical sampling process add critical data that helps to connect identified concepts and categories into a single and integrated theory.

This study classified the essential categories and related concepts into themes. These themes and subthemes within them were connected into a coherent model.

Memo Writing: Memo writing is an essential process of informally documenting ideas, concepts, and relationships from the dataset and the researcher's views, thoughts and reflections. Memo writing is vital in capturing the participants (through transcripts) and the researcher's everchanging thought processes and views. It is also of importance in facilitating reflexivity.

Including reflexivity as a strategy throughout my study's design phase was crucial because it plays a vital role in phenomenological investigations and memo writing (Finefter-Rosenbloh, 2017). Recognising one's prejudices, convictions, and life experiences through reflexivity enables the researcher to actively explore how they might affect the study process (Finefter-Rosenbloh, 2017). Reflexivity was introduced into this study by situating the researcher at the beginning of Chapter 1. The data collecting and analysis sections go into further detail on how I used reflexivity.

Theoretical Saturation: This is a scenario where new information from participants ceases to contribute towards the theory construction process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). This process is critical because it suggests to the researcher that all important concepts and categories necessary for theory development have been accounted for. It, therefore, adds trustworthiness to the theory (Finlay, 2021). I was able to account for all the key concepts that came out of the data under the five themes. I confirmed this by repeatedly going through the transcripts to ensure I would capture any critical data I might have missed in the coding processes.

Theory Development: This is the stage where theoretical codes are connected, accounted for and discussed. The rationale for linking these codes is also discussed and justified. A theoretical model titled the ***Career Framework for Mobility Of Non-Academic Women In Higher Education*** was produced from the above efforts. As an expectation, the resultant theory or model should answer the study's research questions of interest, meeting its research objectives. This was achieved by discussing the theory, its findings and how it meets research objectives.

Member Checking: This stage involves sharing the theory with the research participants and area experts (Finlay, 2021). Sharing the theory with participants is essential in ensuring that the theory was indeed a co-creation rather than the researcher's unilateral production (Khanal, 2018). A successfully co-created theory will reflect the participants' general viewpoints. I shared the final theory with the supervisor as an expert and with three participants. They all agreed that the theory reflected their views on the career trajectories of non-academic women towards senior leadership in HEIs in South Africa.

Report writing: I then completed the theory's write-up using Microsoft Word, including its schematic diagrams.

3.9 STRATEGIES TO ENSURE RIGOUR

Positivists often criticize qualitative research for its perceived shortcomings in reliability and validity, as noted by scholars such as Mays and Pope (1995), Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) and Shenton (2004). Critics argue that qualitative research is

vulnerable to researcher bias and lacks reproducibility, suggesting that different researchers conducting the same study may generate divergent results. Furthermore, another concern raised is the limited generalizability of qualitative findings, as emphasized by Mays and Pope (1995). These critiques underscore the challenges posited by positivists regarding the consistency, objectivity, and applicability of qualitative research compared to quantitative methodologies.

To address these issues and maintain the validity of qualitative research findings, rigour is required at all stages of the research process, including research design, data collection, interpretation, and results communication (Mays & Pope, 1995). In qualitative research, trustworthiness is equivalent to validity in quantitative methods. It is critical to recognise that qualitative research texts can be interpreted in various ways (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Several recommendations for enhancing the reliability of qualitative research encompass aspects such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Loh, 2013; Morse et al., 2002; Shenton, 2004). These components are interrelated, and their incorporation into the research process is essential to guarantee the accuracy and quality of the findings, recognizing that the concept of generalizability may not be as directly applicable as it is in quantitative research (Mays & Pope, 1995).

3.9.1 Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research pertains to the effectiveness of both the data and analytical procedures in addressing the primary focus of the study (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Careful consideration in selecting participants is crucial to enhance the quality of data related to the studied phenomenon. Additionally, the judicious choice of data collection methods and the determination of an appropriate sample size are vital steps for instilling confidence in the research (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Shenton, 2004).

To enhance the validity of research findings, it is important to utilize the most meaningful units, which are clusters of words or phrases sharing similar meanings or themes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Ensuring that themes and categories accurately and comprehensively capture the material, leaving no crucial information unaddressed, further contributes to enhancing credibility.

3.9.1.1 Data triangulation

To analyse the same phenomenon in a study, data triangulation employs multiple data sources, different research methods, or multiple researchers (Berg, 1998; Collis & Hussey, 2014; Ghauri, Grhaug & Strange, 2020). Comparing and correlating data from various sources or points of view helps to eliminate prejudice and increase the trustworthiness of findings (Kumar, 2020). The findings were compared and discussed alongside those from previous studies as part of the triangulation process.

3.9.2 Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability refers to how much the findings apply to situations or groups other than the specific study context (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Transferability, as opposed to generalisation in quantitative research, is more concerned with the researcher's estimate of how likely the results will be helpful in various situations.

A detailed and in-depth assessment of cultural and contextual factors, participant selection and characteristics, and data collection and analysis techniques must be provided to demonstrate transferability (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Because of the sharing of this comprehensive information, other researchers will be able to assess the similarities and differences between their environment or group and the one used in the study, and they will be able to decide whether the results can be used in other circumstances.

Using detailed presentations and direct quotes from participants can improve the transferability of findings. These quotes and detailed descriptions help readers assess the findings' applicability and utility in their contexts by providing a complete picture of the participants' perspectives and experiences.

It is critical to understand that the goal of transferability is not to assert that the findings are universally applicable; instead, the goal is to provide readers with the information they need to determine whether the findings may apply to their specific settings or groups.

3.9.2.1 Thick description

In qualitative research, the concept of "thick description", which was popularised by Geertz, is crucial as it enables the researcher to offer thorough and contextual information while observing and interpreting the social meaning (Ponterotto, 2005). Thick description necessitates a broad understanding of numerous cultural contexts and populations. To fully capture the thoughts, feelings, and social interactions of the people being observed, the researcher must accurately describe and understand social interactions within their proper context.

To increase the validity of my study and ensure that readers could understand the participant interviews, I provided a detailed description, I gave detailed descriptions of the participants, including information about their workplaces and job titles, the length and setting of the interviews, and our responses. I assigned a pseudonym to each participant and used accurate quotes to represent their voices in the results. In the discussion section, I used detailed descriptions to connect the experiences of the study's female participants with my interpretations of those experiences.

Using this technique, readers could fully comprehend the participants' experiences while also increasing the validity of my research.

3.9.3 Dependability

Dependability is an essential aspect of trustworthiness in qualitative research because it addresses instability and potential changes during the research process. It entails considering how much the data may change over time and the decisions made by the researcher when analysing the data (Rose, & Johnson, 2020).

Data consistency was possible due to the four months it took to collect data for my study. However, I attempted to strike a balance between repeatedly asking the same questions of each participant and considering that data collection is a dynamic process that allows

for shifting insights into the phenomena being studied. This adaptability enabled the incorporation of novel ideas and points of view during the research process.

The triangulation process, which involves using multiple data sources and approaches, contributed to the reliability of my study. I was able to reduce the impact of my own biases and increase the dependability of the findings by combining a variety of perspectives and data sources. These data sources included findings from the literature reviewed and the perceptions of the 20 interviewed participants. Triangulation improved the study's overall reliability by allowing for a more in-depth understanding of the research question.

3.9.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is an important aspect of reliability in qualitative research because it focuses on how well the final report's results, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data gathered (Sumrin, & Gupta, 2021). I used a number of techniques known to help qualitative researchers develop credibility to establish confirmability in my study.

The process of synthesis and cross-referencing with my supervisor increased confirmability significantly. I thoroughly analysed and interpreted the data, solicited my supervisor's feedback, and ensured that the final report was solidly based on the knowledge gained during the study.

For a detailed explanation of how I used these techniques in my study, please see Table 5 on page 86 for a thorough breakdown of the tactics and procedures used to improve trustworthiness in the research process.

3.9.5 Reflexivity and bracketing

Data collection in a phenomenological study is reflective and aimed at capturing participants' perceptions and direct experiences (Quinney et al., 2016). The possibility of subjectivity in the data collection process, however, is one of the difficulties of qualitative research.

Continuous interactions between the researcher and the participants heighten the potential for the researcher to unintentionally introduce their biases, incorporate prevailing

cultural prejudices, or create autobiographical accounts (Mruck and Breuer, 2003). These factors can influence the method of data collection, as well as the reliability and precision of the findings.

Table 5: Trustworthiness criteria and techniques to establish them Adapted from Loh (2013)

Credibility	• Extended participation (Each interview had a duration of no less than one hour, with some extending beyond two hours when required. Following transcription, I occasionally conducted follow-up discussions with the participants.) • Observation (This included ongoing observation of both the researcher and the participants.) • Data triangulation (I sought information about the participants from alternative sources to enhance the reliability and validity of the data. The chapter previously detailed the process of triangulation and its limitations.) • Peer debriefing (I promptly discussed the interviews with my supervisor after their completion.) • Analysis of negative cases • Ensuring reference adequacy through data archiving • Member validation checks
Transferability	• Thick description (I strived to offer extensive details about the interviews and results, aiming to enable the reader to immerse themselves in the process. This encompassed conveying nuances like the participants' body language, facial expressions, and any observable physical gestures such as clapping or making emphatic gestures.)
Dependability	• Triangulation (as discussed above) • Examining the investigation process for dependability (The interviews were audio recorded, and the recordings will be kept until the final report has been examined.)
Confirmability	• Confirmability audit - inspects the product to ensure that data back up the findings, interpretations, and recommendations. I reviewed the data that emerged to identify any potential discrepancies and, where necessary, contacted the participant to clarify or confirm the interview record.
All four criteria	• Journal of self-reflection and method (Throughout the study, I kept a research journal documenting my experiences. I documented my thoughts, feelings, and experiences during the research process and was open about my research biases.)

The researcher's constant self-reflection and awareness of their (researcher's) potential impact throughout the study process is an important component of qualitative research (Chan et al., 2013). It emphasises the importance of critically examining the methods used by researchers to collect data and understand their findings while also acknowledging their position within the social context in which they conduct their research

(Berg, 1998; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Johnson & Waterfield, 2004; McDermid et al., 2014).

Bracketing is used to address the problem of researcher bias. Researchers can use bracketing to separate their own experiences and opinions from the interpretation of the phenomenon being studied (Chan et al., 2013; Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017). Bracketing procedures must be used throughout the study process to ensure the data's reliability. Although there are no predetermined criteria for bracketing, it does require an honest assessment of one's values and attitudes, the detection of potential biases, and the application of tactics to limit and mitigate the effects of those biases.

Chan et al. recommend keeping a research journal (2013) when using bracketing. As soon as I began my research, I kept a diary. This gave me a safe space to express and examine my feelings and thoughts on the discussed subjects. To avoid projecting my experiences and emotions onto the study participants, I tried to communicate and analyse my feelings in the diary. The diary helped me keep track of my thoughts and feelings while collecting and analysing data and developing interpretations of the data and themes.

Supervisory sessions were also essential during the data collection and analysis phases. These discussions covered the entire data collection, transcription, and analysis process. They enabled me to assess my interpretations, potential biases, and any new issues with subjectivity (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017; Shenton, 2004). The events provide a relaxing setting for reflection, treatment, and mental acclimatisation to upcoming interactions and data processing.

Overall, acknowledging and addressing the researcher's subjectivity, reflexivity, and bracketing procedures were used to improve the reliability and rigour of the qualitative research process.

3.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research ethics refer to the researcher’s obligations towards upholding and preserving research candidates’ rights related to the inquiry process (Saunders, et al., 2019). Researchers have ethical obligations to the institution they represent, the study subjects,

society at large, and even themselves (Kumar, 2020; Saunders et al., 2019). This study's ethics were carefully considered to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants.

After the Methodology colloquium panel approved the research techniques to be applied in the study, I sought permission from the SBL Research Ethics Committee before beginning fieldwork. The clearance certificate attesting to adherence to ethical standards is included in ***Appendix 1.*** Informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, physical safety, and other ethical concerns were all considered.

Informed consent requires the full disclosure of any material information that can affect a participant's decision to participate in a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kumar, 2020). The information for disclosure includes the research stakeholders, the purpose of the study, the type of participation required of the participants, the potential research benefits, and risks, and all the relevant permissions and approvals required in conducting the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Informed consent also includes communicating all the rights that the researcher guarantees to the research participant and how they will be upheld (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I obtained informed consent from each participant before participating in the study to prioritise personal autonomy (Babbie, 2020). Participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could leave at any time without consequence. Before the first interview, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form to confirm their understanding and consent.

With informed consent comes voluntary participation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is when participants participate in the study due to free will. Complete information informs them they will not be penalised or rewarded for participating (Kumar, 2020). This was the case with this research. I did not coerce or pressure anyone into participating; no one was promised or rewarded for their participation.

The right to confidentiality and anonymity relates to protecting the participants' information and identities (Kumar, 2020). To protect participants' confidentiality, their identities, organisations, and positions were never revealed at any point in the study. Instead, each

participant was given a pseudonym (Berg, 1998; Quinney et al., 2016). Participants' data will not be accessed by unauthorised third parties. Also, I guaranteed to store this data in a password-encrypted laptop to ensure there is no unauthorised digital access. This strategy ensured anonymity and confidentiality. To further mention, four participants were known to me and were from the same institution as me. I guarantee that their information will not be used to identify them, and any data that may unintentionally reveal their identities will remain hidden. In the data analysis, I hid any data linking the participants with any HEI.

According to Kumar (2020), the right to protection from harm is meant to ensure that the researcher protects the participants from any potential physical, psychological or legal adversities they may suffer due to participating in the study. To protect participants from these harms, I communicated that they were free to attend the interviews or to withdraw their participation any time before the study's publication. Also, I carefully observed the participants for any observable discomforts that could be communicated through body language. These could indicate psychological discomfort with the interview process and its questions.

Cooper and Schindler (2003) state that maintaining the highest levels of professionalism and accuracy was essential throughout the study. The importance of research integrity cannot be overstated. The outcomes were meticulously documented, ensuring the information gathered was accurately reflected. The study aimed to uphold the standards of integrity and professionalism within the research field, prioritizing the protection of participants' rights, well-being, and confidentiality.

3.11 CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on outlining the study's research methods. It contains a comprehensive overview of the research procedure, detailing the chosen research design and paradigm, and offering a comparative analysis of qualitative and quantitative research. It focuses on constructivist grounded theory as the selected approach and addresses key elements such as the importance of thorough description, data triangulation, identification of the study's population, sampling technique, and justification

for the chosen sample size. The chapter also covers the data collection strategy, methodological challenges, strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, and the data analysis process. Ethical considerations in fieldwork and reporting of findings are discussed. The subsequent chapter will present and discuss the study's findings, grounded in the research methods outlined in this chapter.

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I used a constructive grounded theory method to analyse data collected through semi-structured interviews. The analysis sought to uncover themes and narratives in the data to create a model, framework, or theory that sheds light on the career paths of women mid-level leaders in higher education. To begin, I summarised the profile of the interviewees, referred to as Participants, outlining their backgrounds and relevant characteristics. The interview questions I created for the participants were inspired by the study's research questions, specifically designed to address the research objectives. The initial, focused and theoretical coding processes produced five themes related to the study's objectives, presented after the participants' description section. After the presentation of the theme, the data analysis' resultant framework is presented, followed by discussions linking it to theory. It should be noted that the study aimed to understand the narratives about the lived experiences and career progression of non-academic women in middle-level positions in HEIs and develop a career framework for their benefit.

4.2 PARTICIPANTS DESCRIPTION

The sample included 20 female participants in various non-academic mid-level management positions within higher education institutions (HEI) in South Africa. Table 6 summarises these participants, labelled Participant 1 (P1) through Participant 20 (P20), in the order in which they were interviewed.

Table 6: Participants' description

Participant	Race	Starting point	Current point
P1	Indian	Fitting room attendant	HR practitioner
P2	Indian	Educator	Researcher administrator
P3	African	1983 as a mid-level professional in government	Systems consultant - specialists' authority
P4	African	1999 as a university call centre agent	Academic Information Management System expert
P5	Coloured	Started as a food manager - with a university qualification	Manager in a research institute
P6	African	Over 20 years as a junior HR officer in government	HR specialist
P7	African	Provisional administrator in the construction industry,	HR specialist
P8	Indian	public relations, marketing, academic	HR specialist
P9	African	1994 with administrative duties in ICT training	Head of professional development centre
P10	Coloured	Started as a junior lecturer	Organisational Development
P11	White	Salary clerk in a food company in the mid-70s	Academic support manager
P12	White	Computer programming (skills development)	Divisional digital training and development unit manager
P13	Coloured	High school teacher	Acting director responsible for training, recruitment
P14	African	In the 1990s, as a municipality clerk, secretary	Skills development manager
P15	African	Qualified Psychologist for over ten years	Human capital manager
P16	African	Psychologist in 2002	HR director
P17	African	Administrator in the university finance department in 2009,	Transformation executive at a university
P18	African	Administrator in 1999 with a bachelor's degree	Deputy director in HR operations
P19	White	Language teacher, also a trade unionist	Middle management – administrator
P20	African	Labour relations practitioner in a government department	Labour relations practitioner

Participants came from various racial groups and the two broad sections of higher education's professional and administrative sections. Furthermore, the participants' careers began and progressed across three political generations: apartheid, immediate

post-democratic, and current. This brings a diverse range of experiences, which is critical for the exploratory nature of this study.

The themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented in this section. The findings are arranged in accordance with the research questions.

4.3 THEME 1: COMMON NARRATIVES IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT TRAJECTORIES

The time it took to advance from entry-level to middle management was a common theme in the participants' stories. Career stagnation across stages was a common issue, with participants believing it took far too long to advance from one stage to the next. After over 30 years of lower and middle management, some participants, such as P14, were still trapped with little hope of progress. Table 7 below shows the participants' summarised career trajectory descriptions.

Table 7: Common narratives in career development trajectories

General description of one's trajectory	Current status	Examples
Taken too long to get the senior management level	Eventually got close	P1, P4, P9, P14, P20
Taken too long to get the senior management level	Still struggling to get there	P2, P3, P6, P11
Took shorter than expected turns	Eventually got there	P17
Trajectory delayed by breaks, interruptions	Still struggling to get there	P2, P6

One expected to advance from one level of their career to another within a reasonable period, which in some cases was subjective to one's expectations. However, some participants found their progress to be slower than desired, and this was highlighted by P1, P3, P6, and P20. According to P1, P3, and P20, universities do not provide women with adequate opportunities for advancement through promotions and internal job application processes. As noted by P1:

"You're not given that opportunity, and therefore you find yourself, you sort of stagnant. So, it's like you either have a choice, it's you. You're going to focus on your career, focus on your family and try to grow that way." – P1

Like P1, P6 also identified career breaks that women are forced to take due to family obligations as another contributor to this challenge. This emphasised a link between family or work-life balance and threats to career stagnation. In P6's words:

"They are work-life balance sometimes. Yeah. My family is still young. My kids are still young, still in primary one in high school. So sometimes I think as a woman in a hectic environment like ours, it's difficult to choose what you want to do, your own personal advancement in terms of extra studies or advancement, extra work versus what you have to give to your children like being present as well for me it's important to be present and in my kids' lives. At the same time, how do I balance my goals or dreams of becoming an HR manager one day? Maybe you sort of put back your career goals at it." -P6

Work-life balance issues are discussed further in this section under a different subtheme.

There is also evidence of long-stretching careers in the women's narrative, with points of stagnation lasting as long as 20 years in P6's case. P6 worked as an HR officer in various industries for this time, whereas P12 worked as a tutor manager for 32 years.

Slow-paced career growth was more of a result of the existing leadership development dynamics in higher education, where men still had more opportunities to advance their careers quickly compared to women. However, the participants saw this as both a result and a challenge. In P3's words:

"You know, to be honest with you, especially here at this university. I wouldn't say that there has been much professional advancement. In that,

when you like, in our case, when you get into a position. In my case, when you get into a position, it's that position or nothing else. This university does not have any promotion prospects. You can only hope that you apply for a position outside. Where you are, and then that's how you can grow." – P3

In the above, P3 was responding to how being a woman had affected her professional advancement. She highlighted that her case of failing to advance her career within an expected timeframe was not unique and referred to it as "our case" to indicate that it affected her and other women in similar positions.

Like the participants, Keane et al. (2022) see career stagnation as a challenge that affects women more than men. Slow promotion, as described by Keane et al. (2022), was part of the "overt discrimination and implicit bias." This was a component of university leadership systems. The literature by Duan et al. (2022) supports P6's claim that family obligations also cause career stagnation. At the same time, this reflects male-dominated systems' insensitivity to women's maternal responsibilities and women's issues in general. Time absences due to childbirth and general family commitments should be accommodated as typical realities in a well-crafted policy environment rather than being punitively considered legitimate disadvantages to women. Such an opinion is shared by Duan et al. (2022), who, like P6, sees the challenge as the normalisation of slow career development among women who have had to take family commitment breaks from the workplace rather than the process of taking breaks.

4.4 THEME 2: SUCCEEDING AT THE MICRO OR PERSONAL LEVEL

The second theme concentrated on the micro- or personal-level factors associated with the success of HEI women's career advancement. Skills, knowledge, values, and characteristics were critical for advancing to senior management positions. Subthemes in this theme include knowledge, skills and capabilities, values and traits, work-life balances, skills, knowledge, and experience challenges. Skill is one of the most important factors that women leaders consider as they strive to advance from middle to executive leadership. The possession or lack of skills is arguably one of the most powerful

determinants of one's career progression into higher leadership roles, as evidenced by the interviews. However, this assumes a level playing field in which other sociodemographic indicators, such as race and gender, can override the importance of skills. This theme examined skills as a critical success factor, assuming that skills, as an indicator of competence and capacity, are not subordinated by race, gender, or other sociodemographic indicators. As a result, Theme 2 focuses on the critical factors required for success in the respondents' current role. The theme was mostly inspired by responses to the question, "What are the critical factors for you to succeed in this current position, your substantive position?" Codes for this theme were also developed based on the respondents' career growth narratives. Table 8 shows the three identified critical success factors, which are divided into three categories: knowledge, skills and capacities, and values-related factors.

4.4.1 Knowledge as a success factor

Knowledge emerged as one of the most important success factors and demands for non-academic women in higher education to advance from middle to senior-level management. Table 8 summarises the broad perspectives on knowledge and career advancement.

Table 8: Knowledge as a success factor

Critical success factors	Group codes	Contributors
Practical knowledge of work context	Knowledge	P1, P3, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16
Studying towards a career path	Knowledge	P1, P11, P12, P16, P17
Understand the organisation's strategy/strategic capabilities.	Knowledge	P1, P2, P3, P4, P13, P18, P19
Practical knowledge of work systems, content	Knowledge	P4, P6, P12, P18
Staying up-to-date with discipline	Knowledge	P12, P16, P17
Understand your role	Knowledge	P6, P13

The preceding factors are expanded on, beginning with practical knowledge of one's work context.

4.4.1.1 Practical knowledge of work context

Practical knowledge of one's work context or environment was regarded as critical in enabling one to grow and succeed in their current position. This was related to understanding organisational environment dynamics, which included value chains and how they relate to the macroenvironment. This aspect was highly saturated, being mentioned or discussed in detail by P1, P3, P6, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16 and P19. As stated by P19:

> ***"You have to be knowledgeable about all aspects of the higher education environment. Because you have to be able to contribute critically and constructively on most aspects of the high education environment." – P19***

In P3's words:

> ***"So for me, that (practical knowledge) is critical like to do your research and understanding of the functions and that are performed in each business unit or each role" – P3***

According to Dubrin (2022), organisational knowledge is one of the most important characteristics of successful leadership. This is information about how the organisation functions as a whole. Furthermore, one must understand the group tasks within this organisation. This aspect, referred to as the "cognitive factors" of leadership by Dubrin (2022), was widely applicable across the areas and disciplines in which leaders operated. As a result, it stands to reason that these could also apply to women in higher education leadership positions.

4.4.1.2 Understand the organisation's strategy/strategic capabilities.

Understanding the organisation's strategic aspects was critical for a mid-level manager after understanding one's organisational environment. This was also a highly saturated subtheme, with contributions from P1, P2, P3, P4, P13, P18, and P19. While this was a knowledge issue, it was closely related to skills that could be classified as strategic capabilities - the ability to comprehend one's organisation from a strategic, goal, vision, and mission-driven perspective. This was deemed significant because mid-level

professionals interpret and tactically implement strategies, and their work is directly related to organisational and institutional outcomes (P7). This viewpoint is broadly summarised in the excerpt below from P3:

> ***"I think the most critical thing is that you have to have an understanding of the functioning of the university at the strategic level because our role is that of advice, things, stuff and line management about translating the organisation's objectives into clear individual goals. But now you know. Our section is sort of a little bit stifled in the sense that we only do performance management at the individual level. We don't take that up to the organisational level, so the most important thing that I think we need to know is how to talk to the organisation's strategy effectively. So, for us to be effective in our areas, understanding what informs the organisation's annual performance plan, you know what informs the organisation's strategy, and what are the things that were considered when the strategy was crafted. And to be what it is right now."-P3***

P1 also commented that understanding the organisation's strategy was important but had to be complimented by understanding team behaviours and relationships as well:

> ***"It's sometimes it's like where they say. Before you shoot your mouth off, you need to listen, listen, read the policies, read the procedures, watch how people behave, and then for you to really understand the meaning of strategy."-P1***

This ability to understand, interpret, and successfully implement organisational strategies is cited in the literature as a competency area that women readily possess. Willows and Van der Linde (2016) believe that organisations that fully utilise women's brain power can improve organisational competitiveness, a key strategic performance indicator. According to Tomal and Jones (2022), women and male leaders' strategic competence did not differ, and this was a skill that had nothing to do with gender. These perspectives and the

findings in this section highlight two crucial factors: (1) understanding the organisation's strategy was critical for organisational success as part of strategic competence, and (2) women leaders held this capability equally.

4.4.1.3 Studying towards career needs – develop adequate skills.

The participants also agreed that studying to meet both current and projected career demands was critical to success. This was mostly about formal study in institutional settings, and those who thought it was important were P1, P4, P11, P12, P16, P17 and P18. P17 believed that mid-level managers needed to be subject matter experts in their fields, which necessitated extensive research. Along with P12, P16, P17, and P18 also noted the importance of regularly updating one's discipline-related knowledge to keep abreast with change. This is referred to as keeping an "updated version" of one's skills, according to P17. Skills, as they were developed, became obsolete over time, and retaining such skills in their obsolete state will jeopardise one's ability to advance into executive leadership. Thus, P18 noted that:

> ***"You know our career. It's not only, uh, the education or the academic achievement, it also technical…So you need to be extra and need to be firm. They need to always, always, always keep abreast with their career development. So you need to schedule them." -P18***

P4 referred to the importance of self-development, referring to her own experiences. Despite being academically qualified, P4 noted the need to continue upskilling not only herself but her subordinates as well. This came with time and work-life balance challenges, though:

> ***But the one thing I need to address is the area I'm working on, which I'm responsible for. I need to upskill my team to be able to develop myself so that I can have ample time to also focus on myself development." – P4***

According to Yue and Huang (2020), continuing to study toward one's desired career goal may be more critical for women middle managers than men. They discovered that the

relationship between age and job skill obsolescence was significant in women but not in men. Under what Yue and Huang refer to as "high human resources practices," or HR systems that highly support skill development, the relationship only weakened for women. Yue and Huang's (2020) study was conducted among Chinese knowledge workers and is significant in that it captures age as a construct of interest, which is closely associated with career progression. According to the demographics of the participants of this study, the women interviewed were mostly in their mid-to late-life stages, which are broadly related to skills obsolescence. Returning to the study's findings, it is not unreasonable to speculate that in the local higher education environment, the effects of skills obsolescence were felt more strongly by women than men, necessitating the latter to stay current in terms of both academic development and on-the-job competencies.

4.4.2 Skills and capabilities

Skills and knowledge were strongly linked, as evidenced by the assertion that staying current with one's studies was critical for skill development and relevance. Nonetheless, several responses treated the two as distinct characteristics. Skills and capabilities were critically coded under these subthemes as a defined group of critical success factors required for managers' success in their current roles and levels (P1, P2, P15, P16 and P18). Because the participants held various positions in various capacities and organisations, the hard skills they considered critically varied. However, there was a requirement for fundamental skills related to one's line of work. For example, financial management skills were essential for someone working in human resources benefits. Soft skills required to succeed are discussed first.

4.4.3 Soft skills required to succeed

Participants discussed critical soft skills required for success, which were divided into two categories: personal and interpersonal (Table 9). Grierson et al. (2021) and Torlind and Eklof made similar classifications (2021).

Table 9: Soft skills required to succeed

Soft skills	Group codes	Contributors
Communication	Interpersonal	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, O6, P7, P11, P8, P10, P11, P14, P17, P18, P19, P20
Motivational abilities	Interpersonal	P7, P15
Diplomacy	Interpersonal	P11
Knowledge-sharing	Interpersonal	P1
Diversity-related interactions	Interpersonal	P1, P2, P4, P11, P20
Psychology - understanding people	Interpersonal	P5, P7
Public speaking	Interpersonal	P20
Networking	Interpersonal	P14
Political intelligence	Interpersonal	P5, P12
Time management	Personal	P2
Patience	Personal	P1
Problem-solving abilities	Personal	P18, P20
Work ethic	Personal	P20
Emotional intelligence	Personal	P12, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19 , P20
Assertiveness	Personal	P7, P16
Flexibility	Personal	P14, P16
Empathy	Personal	P2, P15
Critical thinking	Personal	P19

Interpersonal soft skills are the abilities required to interact effectively and meaningfully with others inside and outside the organisation. Personal soft skills are those abilities that are required to be more effective in managing personal and organisational life aspects. These two were, however, inextricably linked. For example, to improve communication and knowledge-sharing abilities, one could cultivate flexibility as a personal skill.

Communication (P1, P5, P14), motivational abilities, empathy and emotional intelligence (P14, P15, P16), diplomacy (P11), knowledge-sharing (P1), diversity-related interactions (P1, P2, P4, P11, P20), understanding people (P5, P16, P19), public speaking (P2), and networking (P14) were the soft skills that leaned more on the interpersonal side. Personal soft skills were more closely related to values, with some arguably being more valuable than skills. Nonetheless, due to the study's interpretive nature, some of these, such as assertiveness, flexibility, and empathy, were identified as skills by participants. Time

management (P2) and emotional intelligence were two other critical soft skills that were more personal than interpersonal (P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19 and P20). Below are the extracts on the views related to important soft skills for career progression from middle to higher managerial levels. The extracts were in response to questions and probes on the soft skills one considered important for one's career progression:

> ***"Soft skills. It's definitely basic Psychology. Do you still work with people? High- and high-level professors still have things like Family problems. The soft skills being in communicating with people." – P5***

> ***Read your people, know their strength; keep in touch with them(team/one-on-one); always there for them." – P12***

> ***"Individual working with people – people management – must be dependable; integrity, honesty, creative; changes every day; flexible; mentor other to pass the baton to a younger person I am mentoring. Building a team, decision-making problem-solving skills." – P14***

> ***"I would say physical, most emotional intelligence. It encompasses a lot of things: assertiveness. Our flexibility, I think. meaning that you need to be able to deal with change. You need to be able to drive change." – P16***

> ***"Ability to listen. And I think life skills, life skills in the sense of how would you deal with this matter if it was you, your family member, for example, that had done this, and I think the hard skills come in as well." – P19***

Several scholars, including Dubey and Tiwari (2020), Magano et al. (2020), and Fernandes et al. (2021), assert in the literature that soft skills are critical success factors for personal development in various professional fields. According to the research, soft skill demands differ across professional and skill development areas. Previous studies, like this study, hypothesise that specific fields, such as higher education, require a distinct

set of soft skills. This viewpoint differs from Habecker's (2021), who regards soft skills as generic and cross-cutting. Like Johnson (2020), the respondents in this study generally agree that soft skills predict success and that without the right mix, it may be challenging to maximise one's career potential.

According to Vasanthakumari (2019), soft skills can be divided into personal and interpersonal skills, with the former relating to how one interacts with oneself and the latter with others. While the importance of such skills in career advancement is not widely debated, what appears to differ is the types of soft skills to emphasise. In other words, while scholars may identify similar soft skills, they do not always agree on which ones are the most important.

A study by Guillet et al. (2019) similar to this one, discovered that communication skills were critical in preparing women for leadership positions. They divide communication into four categories: social and professional communication, verbal communication, and nonverbal communication. While Guillet et al.'s study was not conducted within the confines of the South African higher education environment, it emphasises communication as a key success factor in women's career advancement, which participants confirmed applies to higher education as well. As P20 stated:

> ***"Let me be honest, and one of the crucial things is about. And you know able to have a common understanding with each other. I can say communication skills because sometimes we might think that the way we talk to other colleagues it is conducive, yet it might be destroying another person and also critical thinking and problem-solving." -P20***

As a critical success factor in leadership, communication is further associated with leadership style in Udin et al. (2019) study. More open and transformational leadership styles necessitate effective communication with superiors and subordinates and practicing such open leadership styles increases the likelihood of having supportive, satisfied followers who are more focused on achieving organisational goals. Nonetheless,

the same study fails to demonstrate that communication as a soft skill is more important to women than to men. Soft skills, according to Udin et al. (2019), may thus be gender-neutral. However, according to Willows and Van der Linde (2016), women generally outperform men in soft skills, which is one of the reasons why more women should be in senior management. Women's soft skills, according to Willows and Van der Linde (2016), are directly related to improved company performance.

4.4.4 Hard skills required to succeed

Table 10 summarises the hard skills that participants mentioned or discussed as important for one to succeed in their current leadership or organisational role, specifically ascending to executive leadership roles within their current environments.

Table 10: Hard skills required to succeed

Hard skills	Group codes	Contributors
Relevant technical skills for the work area	Technical	All
People knowledge	HR	P1, P13, P17
Context/background of career area	Strategic	P1
ICTs, including daily work programmes	Digital	P2, P3, P4, P5, P13, P15, P17, P20
Report writing	Technical	P2, P3, P5, P12
Data/analytics	Technical	P2, P4, P11, P17
Compliance, regulation, policy	Compliance	P2, P4, P6
Project management skills	Project management	P3, P12, P17
General organisational skills	Administrative	P13, P14, P17
Leadership competence	Leadership	P12, P13
Financial competence	Financial	P2, P13

All participants believed that being an expert in one's professional field necessitated the possession of the necessary technical skills. Other essential hard skills included cross-disciplinary skills in higher education, such as ICTs (P2, P3, P4, P5, P13, P15, P17, and P20), compliance, regulation, and policy-related skills (P2, P4, P6), leadership (P12, P13), and general organisational skills (P13, P14 and P17).

A study titled "The Demand for Executive Skills" by Hansen et al. (2020) discovered six skill clusters significant for executive leadership in all industries, including higher education. Administrative, financial, human resource, monitoring and evaluation,

information, and social skills were among them. The social skills component is concerned with "interacting with, listening to, persuading, and empathising with others." 'Being aware of others' reactions and understanding why they react the way they do" is also a technical skill. The skills highlighted in the interviews are relevant to most of the clusters. The administrative and task skills required for the job as an executive correspond to the administrative skills group listed in Table 10. It also includes the strategic aspect mentioned by P1 as well as any technical skills needed in the executive leadership position of interest. Even though all of these positions are executive, a dean of students may require different technical skills and competencies than a registrar. Financial and digital skills align with the needs identified by Hansen et al. (2020) for financial resource management and information skills. Table 10 does not, however, include monitoring and evaluation skills, and Hansen et al. (2020) do not include project management skills as essential for executive leadership. Bikhari et al. (2021) classified university skills into three categories: technical, soft, and training and skills development. Technical skills encompassed a wide range of domain-specific competencies, from general administration to research. Given that this was one of the core businesses of universities, the skills and development aspect was a skill set in and of itself. The gender of these skill sets was not examined in Bikhari et al.'s study.

The findings highlight that the skill sets required in higher education executive leadership varied, as did their classification. I am of the view that this demonstrates the diversity of critical skill sets depending on areas of leadership expertise. At the same time, they demonstrate the roles of personal experiences in shaping perceptions of required and desired skill sets. Personal experiences of how a particular skill set helped one advance their career are likely to reinforce one's view of the significance of that skill.

4.4.5 Values and traits

There was a list of personal characteristics that were also required to advance in one's career. These traits, to some extent, resemble soft skills; however, unlike hard skills, they are more of personality and attitude factors than developed capabilities. They tended to appeal to personality and character. The differences were subtle, but they were

highlighted in the participants' responses. As suggested by the participants' responses, values are general beliefs and behavioural guidelines that appear to be intertwined with traits. Values and traits of interest to the participants are summarised in Table 11 below.

Table 11: Critical success factors - values and traits

Critical success factors	Group codes	Contributors
Openness, welcoming	Values	P5, P11, P17
Alignment of personal versus organisational values	Values	P2
Honesty, accountability	Values	P5, P14
Client and people-oriented approach	Values	P17, P18
Proactiveness	Values	P16, P17
Diversity	Values	P11
Accountability	Values	P2, P19
Attention to detail	Values	P5
Resilience	Values	P5, P7, P16
Confidence	Values	P17

There were two broad perspectives. The first was that one needed to have values that aligned with the organisation they worked for (P2), regardless of what these were, and the second was on having standalone personal values (P5, P14 and P17, among others). Individually mentioned or discussed values included openness or welcoming (P5, P11, P17), honesty and accountability (P5, P14), client and people-oriented values (P17, P18), proactiveness (P16), racial neutrality (P11), objectivity (P5), attention to detail (P5), and resilience (P5, P7, P16). P7 defines resilience as the "thick skin" required when dealing with critical, educated people commonly found in HEI settings:

> ***"You need to have a thick skin because you are dealing with the whole university of people who are highly qualified sometimes" P7***

The analysis also demonstrates that, in some cases, the values of women leaders cannot be separated from one's narrative. Values are formed in order to deal with challenges and to better relate to the social, political, and economic environment that has influenced one's career. For example, in P2, the strong insistence on the alignment of personal and family values is attributed to coming from a well-favoured religion and traditional background

where a family can never be sacrificed for a career. She had to take a 10-year career break just to raise her children, and such moves could easily clash with contemporary organisational views and thus values on the relationships between work and family - in current organisations, as also highlighted in some narrations, work comes first:

> ***"So so I had to actually resign from teaching to play the role of housewife. So I was at home for the period of like ten years, but in within that ten years. I had to like, I raised my four children that were born one year apart, right."- P2***

Such values, according to the researcher's objectives, are also related to the gendered organisation in which males see no need for long breaks (are less affected by family raising due to gender roles). Brue (2018) discusses the importance of balancing values and priorities in the career development of female leaders in the literature. This viewpoint is consistent with P2's experiences, which indicated a need to balance personal, family-centric values with career development priorities, an element that also influences the rate at which her career grows in the manner envisioned by Brue (2018). In terms of personal values and traits, women needed to develop values and traits that resonated with the levels of resistance they faced in less compromising organisations, and Khilji et al. (2019) covered this topic well. While Khilji et al. (2019) address gender and career progression among engineers, their perspectives agree with P7's "thick skin" argument, noting the importance of developing traits associated with adapting to tough gendered environments.

According to Khilji et al. (2019), there are three primary options for aligning with one's environment (reconciling personal versus organisational values), which are confirmation, negotiation, and resistance. These three are all represented by the values mentioned above. The need to align with a higher education institution's values, honesty, and accountability reflects the confirmation of "playing by the rules" (Khilji et al., 2019:1032). Values and traits such as racial neutrality and client and people orientation are more strongly aligned with negotiating with existing organisational value systems or

"negotiating to play around the rules." As Khilji et al.'s (2019) argument progresses, women may see a need for "defying to establish own rules." This does not readily and widely emerge from the interviews, indicating the interviewed women's preferences for the first two options - confirmation and negotiation.

4.4.6 Behaviours and actions

This sub-theme focuses on the behaviours and actions to look out for on one's path to career advancement, as discussed by various participants and summarised in Table 12. Considering that behaviours and actions are linked to one's values and traits (Skimina, Cieciuch & Strus, 2021) as well as knowledge and skills (Sih, Sinn & Patricelli, 2019), some of the behaviours intersect with traits and skills.

Table 12: Success factors - Behaviours and actions

Factors facilitating advancement	Contributors
Getting support from family	P6, P17
Exerting impact and relevance	P6, P17
Working hard while self-developing	P6, P14
Being self-motivation and driven	P14
Exhibiting a positive attitude/mindset	P6, P11, P13, P14
Preparing for positions through self-improvement	P3, P4, P17, P20
Having open-minded interactions/ relationships	P16, P20
Volunteering, helping out	P6, P20
Supporting other women	P20
Not taking a promotion is not an end in itself	P14, P16, P20
Investing in education/self-development	P4, P11, P13, P17, P20
Accepting feedback and work on it	P16
Reduce workloads	P2
Skilling one's subordinates to afford oneself time	P4
Maintaining a healthy life-work balance	P1, P3, P4, P6, P11, P17, P20

The ability to garner family support was regarded as critical in advancing one's career (P6, P17). This was quite logical, as family issues were identified as a critical component of success via the work-life balance component. P6 and P17 both mentioned the importance of being impactful and relevant in order to advance in one's career. P17

advised staying ***"relevant with what is happening in the space of (one's) work"*** and exerting ***"impactful visibility."*** People will only support one's advancement if they see and feel what one is doing.

Preparing for advancement is regarded as one of the most important "do's" for women seeking to advance in their careers. P3, P4, P17, and P20 all suggested that career advancement was a goal with specific stages and steps. As part of "***preparing themselves for their senior positions****,"* one needed to understand what their desired leadership positions entailed (P20).

The types and quality of relationships formed were thought to be important in preparing for career advancement. One required open-minded relationships and interactions from which they could learn and grow through others (P16, P20). P6 and P20 both mentioned that going the extra mile could be beneficial, and P20 emphasised the importance of supporting other women.

Some participants talked about the significance of self-discipline issues, which differed from traits in that they were actual behaviours and actions that one should or should not do. These were time management and work-life balance (P1, P4, and P11), as well as avoiding being consumed by the desire to advance (P14, P16 and P20). Women sacrificed relationships in order to advance in their careers. In the words of P20:

> ***"Don't leave corpses in your walk because you know you never know when you need to turn back and cross over a bridge again." (P20)***

P2 and P4 discussed the importance of addressing some organisational issues, assuming they are within one's control. Reducing one's work volume empowers one to self-develop for P2, and training one's subordinates could relieve one from too much pressure, freeing up time for self-development for P4.

When considering the theme as a whole and its arising subthemes, there is a systematic pattern that encompasses competencies at three broad levels. The first is the macro level, which is defined as the larger external environment that still affects one's organisation; the second is the organisation or institution itself; and the third is the individual. The data and themes suggest that mastery of the external, internal, and personal environments is critical for women in middle-level non-academic positions.

4.4.7 Work-life balances

Mid-level managers emphasised the importance of balancing work, study, and life as part of their quest for career success. While the work-life balance was mostly mentioned in the interviews, a strong study and self-development aspect stood out among the women. This corresponded to the various perspectives that personal career success at that level necessitated on-going self-development. The work-life balance conundrum highlighted in the interviews is best exemplified by the following quote from one of the interviews:

> ***"And so this is where I find myself like trying to study, trying to manage my career and my family at the same time. And just trying to progress because you have to sacrifice one in order to reach the next goal, be it either with the company I am in or I out" -P1***

The preceding summarises the work-study-life triple challenge that many have discussed. To succeed and advance, one needed complete dedication to the work environment, family (for those who had them), and self-development. One rarely has time for everything, and sacrifices may be necessary. P5 and P6 explicitly stated that they chose not to advance into positions of greater responsibility because they were not ready to devote less time to their families. P5 refers to how a promotion could get in the way of her family life – having a young daughter:

> ***"Those weekend meetings you at the certain level as the weekend meetings, it's the early meetings. You know it's after our meetings. So now if I had to, let's say get a promotion, it will definitely be a challenge. Because of the time,***

because I got my daughter when I was 35, when I was already at this university. So now she's nine and she still at primary school" P5

The work-life balance conundrum is widely discussed in the literature. As previously stated, women leaders escaped this predicament by taking breaks from their careers. This tended to be unfavourable to their career progression. Several scholars, including Johnson (2017) and Brue (2018), see this as a role conflict issue, whereas Shreffler et al. (2019), like P5, observe that having family-care responsibilities lowers application rates for senior-level positions.

4.4.8 Skills knowledge and experience challenges

While the above critical success factors were considered a necessity to succeed, several challenges affected one's ability to possess them or how one interacted with them. This is summarised in Table 13 below.

Table 13: Skills knowledge and experience challenges

Challenges	Contributors
Possessing skill without qualification	P1
No mentorship	P1, P3
Limited/lack of access to internal training (e.g. talent management)	P1
Constrained skills transfers from colleagues	P3
Limited knowledge of new senior role	P4
Excessive pressure to meet predecessor's abilities	P4
Being a specialist rather than a generalist	P6
Lack of role models	P2

A frequently discussed issue was how women gained access to skills, knowledge, and experience, which, as mentioned in the previous theme, were critical for their career success. The issues were numerous. P1 discussed her experiences of failing to advance because, despite having skills acquired through extensive work experience, she was not recognised as a capable person in HEI.

P1 connected this to another issue that was widely discussed in the interviews: the lack of or severely limited access to internal training in HEIs, a viewpoint shared by P3 who bemoaned the lack of mentorship (discussed in detail in Section 4.4.5). P3 had also experienced a lack of information and knowledge transfer from colleagues despite identifying this information and knowledge as a critical source for personal development and career advancement. Poor knowledge and information transfers resulted in some professionals being left out – and noting the importance of "***Understanding organisations' strategy/strategic capabilities"*** and **"*Practical knowledge about work systems, content*"** there was a risk of failing to stay updated as a professional.

P4, an early and quick riser to middle-level non-academic positions, discussed the less-mentioned challenge of being given too many responsibilities versus your abilities at that early career stage. Due to the retirement of a long-serving predecessor, she was catapulted into their position, which came with excessive performance pressure to meet this predecessor's expectations, even though she lacked the immediate relevant upskilling, mentorship, and support:

> ***"Related to the position that I'm currently in and that for me was a challenge and the point of assuming this position independently in the absence of my predecessor, the key challenge which I've experienced was a minimum knowledge in terms of the system that I was required to manage" – P4***

P2 expressed concern about the lack of adequate role models for developing and supporting skill and competence development among women in higher education. P6 stated that being a specialist in a generalist field was difficult in a supportive environment. Despite the benefits of specialists being subject matter experts with intense, rather than narrow and broad, expertise in their fields, her specialist skills were deemed inadequate.

With skills and knowledge being discussed as key success factors in the career growth of women in higher education, it is not surprising that a lack of adequate skills impedes such career advancement. This was mirrored in the works of Aboufadel (2020),

Offermann et al. (2020), and others. According to the findings (Table 13), skills, knowledge, and expertise are also related to organisational training and development dynamics. Participants discussed the lack of mentorships once more, as well as poor or limited internal skill development support, limited skill transfers from colleagues, and, as a result, limited knowledge of new senior roles. The preceding highlights how women leaders expected their institutions to play a role in their skill development, a fit that institutions, as reported, were not meeting satisfactorily. According to Keane et al. (2022), women are less likely to advance to executive positions in meaningful numbers unless higher education institutions support effective, gender-inclusive training and skill development programs. Keane et al. (2022) cite Hopkins University's gender-based leadership training and development programs, which increased the number of female associate professors from four to 26 in five years. The same authors state that this was done in response to a lack of role models and mentors, which was also mentioned in this study. This confirms the important role that institutions play in developing the necessary leadership skills in their female employees.

4.5 THEME 3: SUCCEEDING AT THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

The emphasis of this theme was on identifying those organisational factors that influenced the participants' advancement to senior management. The following subthemes were included in the theme: Dealing with transformation issues, organisational and leadership factors, work politics and conflict, work quality, volumes as a function of gender, and mentoring and skill development support as subthemes. The interviews captured much discussion about the challenges women in middle-level non-academic positions have faced, continue to face, and anticipate facing as they advance in their careers. These are summarised in Table 14 below.

Table 14:Organisation-level issues and challenges

Challenges	Group codes	Contributors
Dealing with a lack of transformation	Dealing with transformation	P4
Exclusion from employment equity as a white woman	Dealing with transformation	P19
Dealing with groups resistant to transformational change	Dealing with transformation	P17
Job insecurity (retrenchments etc)	Organisational and leadership	P1
Organisational processes that stifle skills transfer	Organisational and leadership	P1
Poor leadership as a growth challenge	Organisational and leadership	P1, P13, P15, P16
Bureaucratic structures	Organisational and leadership	P12, P13
Lack of access to organisational information	Organisational and leadership	P3, P4
Dealing with the psychology of negative workplaces	Work politics/conflict	P1
Working with a less-skilled, highly dependent team	Work politics/conflict	P4
Organisational politics that affect appointments	Work politics/conflict	P5
Not getting along with other executives	Work politics/conflict	P5, P15
Negative relationships because of preference for transparency ethics	Work politics/conflict	P17, P18
Dealing with belligerent, powerful unions	Work politics/conflict	P12, P18
Lonely at the top syndrome	Work politics/conflict	P11

4.5.1 Dealing with transformation issues

Employment equity is highlighted as one of the broad strategies to address challenges such as a lack of adequate career opportunities for women, which leads to, among other problems, career stagnation as part of South Africa's transformation. This, too, presents challenges for HEI mid-level leaders. One participant, P19, discusses how, as a white

woman, she is barred from new opportunities due to employment equity concerns. In her words:

> ***"I believe prejudice in this, first of all, by white males and secondly then by the system. If you want to call it that, that is as it's been a challenge. Umm, but it just to add on, I think it's the narrow understanding of employment equity that's brought in there because women were all women, were identified, but somehow, or You know, because of all the skin colour, it was felt. Uh, that you are not. You don't belong to the previously Yeah disadvantaged." – P19***

Her expectations to advance further than her current position is limited because she was part of a cohort that was discriminated against because of her gender and had also persevered in slow-moving careers. At the same time, another female leader sees transformation as a difficult career development endeavour because it attracts excessive negative organisational politics exposure (P17):

> ***"But in the transformation space, the biggest challenge was resistance to change where basically people were not interested" – P17***

Such challenges exposed the participant to negative workplace relationships, putting one's career success at risk. According to Adserias et al. (2017), implementing diversity agendas in change-resistant institutions such as colleges and universities is a difficult task, which is reflected in P17's example. It was a process that was likely to be resisted because of the deeply entrenched patriarchal cultures that had evolved over time.

Going back to P19, their perspectives and experiences resonated with some perspectives that apartheid was about more than just race. The 1997 White Paper shared the view that apartheid affected women in higher education, who were also discriminated against (White Paper 1997: 2.94). Regardless, there is evidence that this is not being considered in today's higher education environment.

4.5.2 Organisational and leadership factors

Many organisational and leadership issues were identified as a challenge in the career paths of the interviewed participants to senior leadership. These included organisational structural changes and bureaucratic structures that stifled the flow of organisational information (P3, P4, P12, P13). P12 discussed organisational "structures that demotivate" employees by ensuring that those in lower-level positions stay there even if they advance professionally and academically.

Poor leadership and, as a result, insufficient support as a result of work toxicity, according to P15 and P16, had also hampered women's growth. P15 recalls being sidelined by her institution's leadership because she had a doctorate before the majority of the leadership. The leadership abused the organisational structures to effectively render her contribution to the institution meaningless. ***"You are Declared redundant - intentionally declared redundant,"*** she recalls. P15's pain is that such a situation was caused by "another woman." P16 also discussed how her superiors pushed for very negative leadership styles that stifled subordinate commitment:

> ***“So, when I joined that position, I enjoyed the position, but it was quite a traumatic time. I don't know what it was, but it's just that the relationship with the boss was quite toxic. But it wasn't just me. It was just the nature of their leadership style” P16***

Negative leadership styles characterised by leaders who competed rather than collaborated with and uplifted subordinates are also associated with negative organisational relationships under a subtheme of work politics and conflict.

Starting with the bureaucracy issue raised by P12 and P13, Arquisola and Rentschler (2023) discovered that bureaucracy was incompatible with the advancement of women leaders in an Indonesian university leadership study. Bureaucratic systems were patriarchal, with men who felt entitled to lead in charge. Any issue concerning the rise of women had to pass through this male-gender protective system. In Arquisola and

Rentschler's (2023) study, bureaucratic systems were also in charge of resource allocation, leaving women's leadership development underfunded. In this study, a similar pattern emerges. One of the key resources that women are denied is organisational information that they need to make important personal decisions as well as contributions that may support their advancement. Fahie (2020: 341) discovered that women in higher education struggled to deal with the "repercussions for their respective career trajectories as they endeavoured to safely navigate their often-hostile work environment" when it came to adverse workplace relationships, also known as workplace toxicity. As Farie (2019) observed in the Irish higher education environment, victims of toxic workplaces attempted to fight the adversities without jeopardising their career advancement prospects. Unfortunately, as that study and this one both highlighted, women frequently lost both.

4.5.3 Work politics and conflict

While the organisational and leadership subtheme dealt with career progression being slowed or halted as a result of the effects of a leader and/or organisational structures, the work politics and conflict theme deals with interactions with colleagues and internal stakeholders who were not necessarily leaders. According to P1, it entails dealing with the workplace's negative psychology. Working with less skilled, highly dependent teams was a professional stumbling block for P4. These were both male and female co-workers. As stated by P4, the leader ended up doing a lot of the work and not having enough time to develop herself:

> ***"What is happening in the space where I work is the lack of knowledge and the minimal of skills that some of my team have. They put a lot of burden on me which results in me having from time to time, so you know carry them." -P4***

In the below extract, P15 relates to how one might need to face up with less competent peers and superiors, both scenarios being potentially explosive sources of work conflict:

"I'm okay; I guess from grading you basically had situations where managers who do not apply policy the way they're supposed to. Then you need to go out there and try to be proactive and fix problems where they arise and that's where one faced issue with regards to policy in the space." P15

P5 and P15 identified not getting along with fellow leaders as a work conflict dynamic, while P17 and P18 mentioned conflict arising from different values and how this affected relationships and one's chances of advancing in one's career. Both participants were referring to being expected to lower their ethical standards in order to match those of someone with the power to influence their career path. P18 describes herself as follows:

"I'm ethical. In 100%, I think at most it irritates and disturbs a lot of people who are not on the same page with me" P18

P5 stated that:

"I don't know. Maybe it's also my way of doing things, you know that makes me a really unpopular person. In HR because everybody knows that if you want to do something through me, there's to be by the book. So I think in most times they think, OK, I think I'm the boss or what, but I'm just. Doing it by the book because I mean. Whether you like it or not, we are here because of the policy and. I mean, I don't think our last this long in my job if. I don't lose sleep I do things by the book. I would have been reported long time ago." P5

Another matter that worried the participants was that of unfair, organisationally driven appointments. They viewed these as political appointments. P1 and P5 saw political appointments as a common reality that excluded those who were not connected to the circles of power and condemned them to the bottom levels of the organisational hierarchy. P5 warned that:

"Because remember in addition to the university being complex, is slightly political, as you know. So, you know most of these things, appointments at times are political appointments." P5

Political appointments disadvantaged women from moving up their careers. This view further connects university politics with "complex" bureaucracies that were mentioned by P12 and P13.

In the examples above, women believed they were expected to sacrifice their ethical values in order to connect with the person who had the power to promote them. This is not an uncommon problem, as Caliadini et al. (2021) discuss further, implying that unethical leaders tended to create safe havens for equally unethical subordinates. Those with competing values risk job dissatisfaction and attrition. This is the same predicament that P18 found herself in. One had to strike a balance between strong positive values (discussed in the values and traits subtheme) and personal progress. Women leaders faced a more serious moral challenge because they preferred more ethically open leadership situations (Bauhr and Charron, 2021). Bauhr and Charro (2021) go on to say that women's leadership was negatively associated with corruption, emphasising that fewer women leaders were corrupt than men.

There were also difficulties in dealing with other stakeholders who wielded significant power over one's fate, such as unions. These were a source of workplace conflict that had an indirect impact on how people were perceived in the organisation. In some cases, both male and female leaders faced the same challenges, such as being subject to bureaucratic systems. Later themes demonstrate that gender and race either moderate or exacerbate these.

4.5.4 Work quality, volumes as a function of gender

In P2's, P4's and P12's experiences, female professionals' career progression towards senior leadership roles and levels was adversely affected by unbalanced work volumes.

This deprived these participants of the time required to upskill themselves for possible career progression opportunities:

> ***"because of this there is not enough time to upskill or to rescale these just too much work and many a time the workload is overwhelming. There's just too much work." P2***

P4 further added that while the work was too voluminous, one did not always have control over how to control it. P12 stated that the time versus work volumes challenge had affected her current capacities to handle important job requirements like monitoring and evaluation exercises:

> ***"The work is too much. The deadlines are very tight. We sort of managing the entire academic structure. Now the problem that I'm having with me is that I can't control my space" -P4***

> ***"Feel I don't have good writing and communication skills… No time to go for courses" – P12***

The above challenges were directly associated with being a woman as participants discussed them in response to a question and probed on specific challenges they faced as women in leadership. Women tended to get more work than males and at the same time, less recognition for it. As work volumes increase, the chances of developing oneself are affected. This problem is further complicated by the fact that females are more exposed to work-life balance dilemmas than males. This challenge (work-life balance) was discussed under Theme 2.

4.5.5 Mentorship and skills development support

Under this theme, mentorships emerged as a critical aspect of skills development and skills transfer. However, there were many challenges associated with mentorship,

particularly their availability, nature, and form. Table 15 shows the available training and skills development methods.

Table 15: Skills development

Developing skills	Group codes
Knowledge sharing	P1, P2, P15
Culture sharing	P1
Internal training, refreshers	P3, P16
Asking for knowledge and guidance from others (informal)	P3. P5, P11
Talking to people with the desired skill set	P2, P5, P14, P16
Interacting with executives with the right skills	P5, P16
Formal qualifications	P2, P17, P19
Experience	P6, P15, P17
Personality-inbuilt	P2 P15, P16
Continuous self-learning	P1

Most methods above were informal, personally driven and supported as well and these included general knowledge sharing with colleagues (P1, P2, P15). There was an element of internal training as well, but response trends suggest that this was considered minimal. Mentorships were not highlighted as a common hard and soft skill development method widely available to mid-level managers. Table 16 below focuses on mentorship:

Table 16: Mentorship roles, nature

Role of mentorship	Group codes
Modelling self after other's positive traits	P1, P3
Being informally mentored by supervisor	P6
Mentorship never formalized	P4
Formalised academic mentor	P19, P20
No professional, formal mentor	P2, P6, P9
Formal male mentor	P11, P13, P15
Supportive team members, bosses, subordinates	P16
Formal female mentor	P12,

By nature, some mentorships were informal and therefore had no structure (P2), while others had no access to mentors (P2, P6, P9). According to P9:

> ***"I had no mentor. The person who has played that role is my husband coaching and giving pointers…Mentors would come to me for assistance – the dual relationship can be negative at times and need some community of practice" P9***

P6 had a mentor but this was not within the structures of a formalised mentorship relationship. It was more of a mentorship situation that emerged informally:

> ***"It's a relationship that develops into mentorship like nothing formal."-P6***

P9 goes on to say that some so-called mentors were looking for knowledge and skill support from mentees, calling the mentor-mentee relationship into question. Some had formal male mentors (P11, P13, P15, and P19), and their experiences with them varied. P13, for example, stated that her mentor was ***"crucial in shaping (her) career from teaching to adult learning,"*** whereas P15 stated, ***"He encouraged me but he was impatient."*** P1 and P3 discussed modelling oneself after people who lacked positive traits and attributes. Regardless of any positive experiences with male mentors, P2 believes that females should be inspired and modelled by other females. The above data reflects poor mentorship programs at the HEIs represented.

The participants, like Moodly and Toni (2017) and Brabazon and Schulz (2020), believed that mentorship was an important process for their advancement from one management level to another. However, these were not readily available or, at the very least, not in the desired formalised form. Lack of mentoring opportunities is discussed as a major hindrance to women's career progression in the literature, as well as in the study, by De Klerk and Verreynne (2017) and Kuntz and Livingston (2020), among others. According to Kuntz and Livingston (2020), women receive fewer mentorship opportunities than their male counterparts, which is supported by the findings of this study. The role of supportive

developmental relationships in fostering career growth among women was closely associated with mentorship. This was discussed by P16 and was also included in Montas-Hunter's (2019) findings. The role of family support, including mentoring by a family member who is not in the organisation, is also highlighted in the same author's work. There were also indications in these findings that some women aspiring to be executives were being mentored informally by both colleagues and supervisors. While this was presented in some cases as a complaint about the lack of formal mentorship arrangements, Friedman et al. (2021: 500) saw peer mentorships as a credible tool for improving "equity higher education leadership." The best examples of this process are P1 and P3. The general argument of Friedman et al. (2021) that mentorships were based on demographic preferences exposing minoritised groups to exclusion, is well captured in this study. As one of the study's recommendations, the peer mentorship model presented as a possible solution to ensure that even minorities can co-mentor each other, sharing skills, traits, and knowledge will be revisited.

4.6 THEME 4: SUCCEEDING AGAINST LEGACY AND WIDER SOCIETAL FACTORS

This theme focused on how larger historical legacies and other external issues shaped organisational-level challenges and prejudices. The theme stems from a broad recognition that external prejudices, experiences, and belief systems permeate the higher education environment, influencing women's career trajectories in a variety of ways. The issues investigated were divided into subthemes, which included betrayal as a reality, subservience/oppression as an experience, discrimination (race and gender), and the problem of gender stereotypes.

The theme of gender's role in relation to race and other issues of diversity was guided by a specific question: "How has being a woman affected your professional advancement?" Even outside of this question, the women's stories highlighted how gender and race have been important aspects of their professional success. Gender was present in many of the study's findings, including the themes and subthemes presented in the previous sections. For example, in Theme 2 on the challenges affecting women's career advancement into

senior and executive leadership, gender is an underlying factor that influences work politics and conflict, as well as work-life balance.

Table 17: Challenges associated with being a woman

Challenges associated with being a woman	Group codes	Contributors
More support from "white males" than black females	Betrayal	P4
Assisted by like-minded females to fight the system	Betrayal	P19
Career stagnancy for women	Discrimination	P3, P14, P16
Some critical work areas were barricaded for males	Discrimination	P14, P20
Limited exposure to leadership opportunities	Discrimination	P14, P20
Low recognition for achievement, and work than males	Discrimination	P13, P15, P16, P17, P19
Discrimination by race	Discrimination	P4, P5
Being perceived as a threat to the males	Stereotypes	P15, P20
Stereotyped for admin work even as a leader	Stereotypes	P11
Stereotypes by gender, then by race (racist)	Stereotypes	P11
Not being taken seriously than men by women	Subservience/subjection	P1, P18
General gender dominance	Subservience/subjection	P5, P7, P13, P14, P18
Being oppressed by other female leaders	Subservience/subjection/ Betrayal	P13, P20
White male dominance	Subservience/subjection	P11, P19

4.6.1 Betrayal

From the narratives coming from the interviews, women generally expected better treatment and career growth support under fellow women, probably given the history of

unfair treatment from male superiors and peers. However, some tended to suffer more under female superiors, and this evoked a feeling of betrayal by their own gender. Contrary to P4's expectations and much to her disappointment, "***the key people who play their role "in*** her ***"advancement quite honestly were White males"*** while some black women acted against her success. This is also observable in P13, P19 and P20's views. P20 who believed that ***"Another woman's problem should be my problem"*** commented:

> ***"So, it's one of the things that I have observed that sometimes even if it's a female who is in charge, they also oppress other women, which are things that we need to deal with decisively to give, to bring some change in our organisation." P20***

She, like P13, further associated with the excessive subservience of women by persons in power. In this study, the term subservience related to being highly and overly subordinated in an oppressive manner that failed to respect one as a professional. This was a subtheme on its own, albeit in the views of P13 and P20, when the subject of this behaviour was another female, it carried that betrayal element too.

Among the key discussions in the theoretical framework, Section 2.2 was the debate on why women in leadership failed to uplift other women and matters related to critical mass came out. Similar issues emerge with middle-level managers feeling "betrayed" by female executives who were not doing enough to uplift them. At the same time, arguments relating to the Critical Mass Theory included views that women executives, in their minority, might not have amassed the required degree of cumulative power and influence to direct pro-women policy change. Going back to Kanter's (1977) arguments, women's leadership in universities might reflect tokenism in which too few a number is elevated to affect significant group change. A diverging view was, however, that some women who had made it to the top became oppressors of other women. Under Kanter's arguments, this might reflect a scenario where increases in the minority group size might foster the differentiation of views including the need to change dominant cultures suppressing such

minorities. If this is the case, the few women in executive power positions might not share the same concern to elevate women in mid-level management as per Kanter's (1977) second argument.

According to Andrews (2020), women executives were pressured to assume identities that made them fit well in male-dominated organisational systems and such identities came with behaviours that did not centre on elevating other women. Andrews also asserts that as women's power rises, they naturally experience a disassociation from their previous peers because of sociopsychological imbalances felt by both. The arguments by the cited scholars versus the participants' experiences were somewhat discouraging. The progression of a few women into higher education executive positions could not guarantee the mass emancipation of other competent whose careers have been stagnant at the middle management level. Why executive women do not uplift lower-level women in organisations?

4.6.2 Subservience/oppression

As a subtheme, subservience carried oppressive, disrespectful, and apathetic undertones. From the interviewees, it exhibited itself through not being taken seriously than men by women (P1, P18); general gender dominance (P5, P13, P14, P18); being oppressed by other female leaders (P13, P20) and white male dominance (P11; P19). Overall, subservience was a notable power relationship where the excessively subordinated or oppressed, because of captioned power inferiorities, failed to progress towards career goal achievement on equal terms with those who were not under such unequal terms. These were mostly males – with P19 stating that:

> ***"I believe prejudice in this first of all, by white males and secondly then by the system. If you if you want to call it that so that is as it's really been a challenge" P19***

P19, who is a white female shares the oppressed and subjected experiences with other black women putting gender rather than race at the forefront of this problem – when

looking at it from a current rather than historical perspective. Racial oppression as a phenomenon affecting women's career progression is widely discussed and acknowledged by many scholars, including Adserias et al. (2017) and He at al. (2019).

4.6.3 Discrimination

Looking at discrimination as a challenge, this closely resembled oppression but had mostly to do with exclusion rather than subjugation. Discrimination as a female-related career challenge involved putting barriers that slowed down or suppressed female career growth while not placing the same on male career development. Thus, the identified discriminatory practices and evidence included: Career stagnancy for women (P3, P14, P16); Some critical work areas were barricaded for males (P14, P20); Limited exposure to leadership opportunities (P14, P20); Low recognition for achievement, work than males (P13, P15, P16, P17, P19) and outright segregation by race (P4, P5). In P5's words***," we have the discrimination where you say, okay, either you are black or white"*** and this directly drives your career path. P4 also recalled a conference where discriminatory practices might have dominated the course of events:

> ***"Must be honest I was also very disappointed when I observed all the presenters in that conference were white females and white males" (P4)***

In the above, discrimination is considered purely racial and in P4's chagrin, this deprived attending young black graduates of opportunities to see black professionals as capable role models.

4.6.4 The problem of gender stereotypes

The stereotyping of black professionals and, in some cases, white professionals was seen as a direct threat to career advancement. The issues were brought to the attention of P11, P15 and P20, among others. Stereotypes were strongly tied to the male dominance belief and agenda (Subservience subtheme above), with some males believing in the subordination of women. Women directly or indirectly resisting subordination were stereotyped as troublesome and problematic. One such way was through getting better educated, and P15 and P20 shared a common experience of how they were interpreted

as headstrong women going against ruling male dominance custom. As P20 explained, despite attaining a PhD:

> ***"it took me time to grow in terms of promotion. I'm going to be honest and say maybe it's because of a strong personality and I was seen as a threat" (P20)***

With males wielding the power of who rises in a career and who does not, this came with the risk of career stagnancy. Women, as expected under the "established gender roles" were good for the low to mid-level secretarial, administrative and operational aspects of HEIs as per P2s and P11s observation. In P2's words:

> ***"a woman is (perceived to be) good for the admin or the advisory part. But I think that is the way it is. It's also a bit of a concern." P2***

A different stereotyping personally experienced by P11 being a white female was being seen as a racist despite her not being one. She lived the experience of being associated with white supremacy while her career had slowed down under the same male-driven systems as black colleagues. Much to her disappointment, while black colleagues had chances of progressing into senior positions because of employment equity, she did not. Gender stereotypes are also among the most discussed reasons for women's slow or no ascension to leadership (Vasconcelos, 2018; He et al., 2019). However, not many studies discuss these in relation to the progression from middle to executive management positions within the higher education realm. Also, a less common stereotype associated with the problem is the labelling of white female middle managers as beneficiaries of past historical injustices. Klasen and Minasyan (2018) state the existence of such beliefs, noting that some sources saw white women as beneficiaries of apartheid. However, while white women had better opportunities than black women, they remained segregated by gender and could not easily advance into professions reserved for white males (Klasen & Minasyan, 2018).

4.7 THEME 5: COPING WITH THE CURRENT SITUATION AND ADVANCING WOMEN

Theme 5 - Coping with the current situation and advancing women was developed from semantic coding processes to responses to the questions: *What factors might assist you in advancing with your career? What advice would you give to young people considering leadership in HEI?;* and *What would you suggest to Higher education institutions in order to improve the career progression of women in admin support?* The theme was also developed from responses from other responses outside these two questions that implied that certain actions would advance women's careers (latent coding). Its subthemes are the role of, and ability to manage work stress, advice to young professionals seeking career advancements and what HEIs could do to advance women's career advancements.

4.7.1 The role of, and ability to manage work stress.

Work-related stress was widely viewed as a force that can disrupt one's current performance and jeopardise future career advancement. The term stress was applied in a broader term and referred to any form of psychological tension that came with the pressures and requirements of career growth. This, therefore, included depression (P1, P16 and P15 among others) and anxiety attacks (P4 and P16). This theme captures the way some women managed or attempted to control stress.

Table 18: Coping with stress

Coping with stress	Group codes
Balanced eating	P1
Avoid stress by being more organized	P11, P17
Exercising	P1, P11, P15, P17, P19
Work-life balance	P1, P11, P15, P17
Loving your work	P16, P17
Socialise, interact with colleagues	P2, P3, P20
Seek advice about work	P3
Professional help like counselling	P3
Medication	P4, P16, P17
Religion	P5, P13, P16
Socialise, interact with family	P5, P18
Hobbies, Shopping	P2, P20
Enjoy the natural environment	P20
Entertainment	P2, P13, P18
Personal self-reflection time	P18
Take each day as it comes	P6

P1 believed that diet affected stress levels and, therefore eating well was part of the solution to the problem. P1 also believed in exercising and keeping a healthy work-life balance:

> ***I think for me that's balanced eating exercise, learning to separate both. Trying to create that work-life balance. I think that is critical" (P1)***

Exercising was also mentioned as a stress relief process by P11, P15, P17 and P19 who except for P19 also took creating a healthy work-life balance as an important stress management aspect.

P6 believed that instead of letting work stress you, one should normalise that and learn to be calm at work. Many work states that created stress were after all everyday occurrences that one needed to get accustomed to. With this view P6 advises others to ***"take it each day as it comes".*** Other ways discussed included: Loving one's work such that it ceases to be a stress factor on its own (P16, P17); socialising and interacting with

colleagues and family (P5, P8, P2, P3, P20), turning to religion (P5, P13, P18) and finding hobbies (P2, P20) and entertainment (P2, P13, P18). However, as extreme measures, seeking professional help like counselling (P3) and resorting to medication were considered possible solutions. The issue of coping at work is also discussed in the study conducted by Moodly and Toni (2017) who highlight that women working in higher education institutions ought to have coping mechanisms that enable them to manage challenging work situations characterised by male dominance. Coping mechanisms however can be developed among women leaders (Moodly & Tony, 2017).

4.7.2 Advise to young professionals seeking career advancement.

As long-serving mid-level managers, the participants have been through various socio-political phases and have experienced how this affects career development. As highlighted, several mid-level professionals in the study have been employed through three distinct phases: the apartheid era, the immediate post-democracy era and the current era characterised by more stable laws on employment and equity. Their advice on young professionals sheds further light on what one should or should not do as part of their career development endeavours. This is summarised in Table 19.

Table 19: Advice to young people

Advise to young people	Group codes	Contributors
Be on the lookout for opportunities	Personal	P2, P14
Give back (go the extra mile, volunteer)	Personal	P14
Understand and master yourself	Personal	P2, P15
Developing at one's pace - rather than being fast-tracked by system	Personal	P19
HEI is too broad, find a niche in it	Personal	P5
Confidence to implement new ideas	Personal	P3
Do not destroy work relationships out of the need to get to the top	Personal	P16, P19
Not neglecting family responsibilities because of work/study	Personal	P2
Self-develop through studying, preparing themselves	Personal	All except P7,P9, P16
Understand the management system	Organisational/personal	P15
Creating an enabling work environment out of their systems	Organisational/personal	P3
Manage workload/commit to current work	Organisational/personal	P2, P4, P5, P12, P16
Motivate others	Interpersonal	P15

knowledge sharing	Interpersonal	P15
Listen to people who motivate/advise you	Interpersonal	P2, P5, P12, P19
Maintain positive relationship	Interpersonal	P5, P13, P15, P16
Have the tenacity to get what you want despite challenges	Interpersonal	P5, P14, P18

The above factors are grouped into personal factors, interpersonal and organisational factors. The organisational factors related to activities that lay directly in the organisations' domain, but for which one could exert varying degrees of influence. The personal factors were those under one's control and influence. Interpersonal factors are related to how one interacts with others. The advice given highlights that one needed to positively impact these three domains if one needed to enhance their chances of career success. This is of cause in consideration of the challenges that exist in the HEI career development environment (Theme 2). The issue of women leadership interacting with the macro, meso and micro level factors resonates with the study findings by Cubillo and Brown (2003) who note that these three domains can also be barriers towards personal development.

4.7.2.1 Personal level

On a personal level, one needed more positive traits that included having the tenacity to get what ONE want despite organisational challenges (P5, P14 and P18), They also needed to be on the lookout for opportunities in their environment (P2, P14), to give back (go the extra mile, volunteer) (P14), to build the confidence to implement new ideas (P3) and to find a desirable HEI niche to develop in (P5). Even more personally, they needed to understand themselves before they could impact anyone else (P2, P15) and upon getting opportunities, it was critical to develop at one's pace rather than rising through stages one was not ready for (P19). P2, who dwelt much on work-life conflicts and demanding family responsibilities, cautioned against the risk of attempting to escape the work-life conflict by neglecting family.

Generally, as per my perspective, the factors that might work against one's advancement should be the opposite, "the flip" of those factors that facilitated advancement. The participants, however, gave explicit views on factors that could work against advancement, and these are captured under this subtheme. They are categorised into

two broad subcategories: personal factors and organisational factors (workplace politics and interpersonal relationships). This is summarised in Table 20.

Table 20: Factors working against advancement

Factors working against advancement	Group codes	Contributors
Beware of the role of the family as a hindrance	Personal	P5, P6
Avoid hearsay, misinformation	Personal	P1
Negative mindset/attitude	Personal	P13
Aggressiveness	Personal	P13
Reserved personality as a function of background - being quiet, not vocal	Personal	P2
Feeling forced to learn beyond one's interest	Personal	P5
Fear of losing current stability with advancement	Personal	P18, P20

As can be noted, these factors are related to the challenges that mid-level managers face in their attempts to advance their careers (Theme 2). While Theme 2 dealt with broader career challenges, this subtheme looked at more immediate challenges that affect one's ability to get a promotion.

4.7.2.2 Interpersonal level

On the interpersonal level, there was advice against destroying work relationships out of the need to get to the top (P16, P19). One needs to have boundaries on what they are willing and not willing to do to succeed in their career. Others advised on the need for and importance of maintaining positive relationships with colleagues (P5, P13, P15 and P16) and listening to people who motivate/advise one (P2, P5, P12 and P19) and motivating others (P15) as well. On the issue of developing interpersonal relationships that foster career advancement, similar conclusions were drawn from the study conducted by Gerdes (2003) who explains that there is a need to have supportive interpersonal relationships with spouses and work colleagues. Gerdes (2003) cautions that although interpersonal relationships can be supportive, some relationships can be detrimental to career growth, hence there is a need to choose partners carefully.

4.7.2.3 Organisational level

An essential part of career growth is to do your work well despite adversity as per the advice of various participants, including P2, P5, P12 and P19. Also, on the organisational side, P3 advised creating an enabling work environment out of their (women's) systems and P5 on the need to understand the management systems they worked with. P3's advice that one should ***"create sort of like an enabling environment for them to practice whatever that they have"*** suggests that one needs to make strides towards transforming one's work environment into a positive space whose development they can positively contribute to rather than waiting passively for the organisation to change.

4.7.3 What HEIs could do to advance women's career advancements

The participants provided views on how the HEI system could address various challenges highlighted in various sections of the interviews. These are summarised in Table 21.

Table 21: Suggestions for HEIs

Suggestions for higher education	Group codes	Contributors
Remove micromanagement practices against women	Adverse organisational factors	P14
Look into women's excessive work burdens	Adverse organisational factors	P2
Promotion policy, succession planning and career paths	Promotion policies, succession planning	P4, P14, P17, P18
Internal skills development	Promotion policies, succession planning/training	P2, P3
Recognise and support administrative departments and functions	Recognition of administrative functions	P12, P18
Put gender research output into practice	Research and information	P14
Encourage and support cultural, and religious diversity	Support diversity	P2
Remove recruitment stereotypes	Support diversity	P14
Women need to support women through career growth challenges	Support women's career growth	P2
Open up opportunities for women	Support women's career growth/empowerment	P2, P14
Support women's ascension to senior posts to inspire others	Support women's career growth/empowerment	P5, P20
Women should be empowered to speak out and express themselves	Support women's career growth/empowerment	P20

Women should unite, engage and organise for their success	Support women's career growth/empowerment	P20
Mentorships	Training and skills development	P2, P14, P20
Leadership development including for persons in positions	Training and skills development	P13
Assist people in learning and understanding company structures, systems	Training and skills development	P5
Active talent management training	Training and skills development	P14
Continuous support programmes beyond conferences	Training and skills development	P13, P19
Support confidence building among women	Training and skills development	P2, P18
Support older white women through AA	Transformation/support diversity	P11, P19

4.7.3.1 Addressing adverse organisational practices

P14 recommended the removal of micromanagement practices against women as these were demeaning and growth inhibitive. Under the same concerns category, P2 highlighted a need to investigate women's excessive work burdens. Wide spans of control for middle managers created equally large administrative and supervisory burdens. These were discussed in the data as inhibiting growth as one failed to find time to self-develop.

4.7.3.2 Promotion policies, succession planning

Many respondents discussed the challenge of (1) lack of promotion and (2) low opportunities through the internal vacancies filling route, both resulting in the career stagnancy challenge. Several participants recommended HEIs have succession plans and promotion plans in place (P4, P14, P17, P18) and internal skills development plans (P2, P3). These would help internal employees to take advantage of vacancies and to be groomed for future promotions.

4.7.3.3 Recognition of administrative functions

P12 and P18 requested HEIs to recognise the significance of administrative departments and not only focus on academic and core business-related units. As P12 puts it ***"admin support for women in admin and support functions depends on the leader and not necessarily on university cultures"***. Wider recognition and support beyond that which is determined by a single individual but the whole HEI system was considered important. Such recognition would spill over to the less recognised but hardworking employees in these departments.

4.7.3.4 Research and information

There was a need for HEI to produce and disseminate information on women's work struggles including struggles and challenges that occurred within its midst. P14 believed that while HEIs conducted a long of research, which they urged and recommended the rest of society to live by, they failed to optimally live by the same standards. In other words, HEIs should also focus on *"**putting into practice what academics are teaching" (P14).***

4.7.3.5 Support diversity

Another set of recommendations was for HEIs to support diversity within the workforce. They could start by encouraging and supporting cultural and religious diversity, noting the multiculturality of women in HEI (P2). Another vital way this could be done was by removing stereotypes when getting people into leadership positions (P2). P11 and P19 saw the need to relook at transformation policies as they, too affected diversity. P19 felt that white women who started working during apartheid were discriminated against in the workplace and in that regard, were historically disadvantaged. As P11 explained: ***"older white women have a need for AA as they were also abused by gender."***

4.7.3.6 Support women's career growth/empowerment

There was also a need to support women's career growth actively. This could take various means, which include women-to-women or peer support (P2), opening opportunities for women (P2, P14), supporting the promotion and ascension of women as a way of inspiring others (P5, P20), empowering women to speak out (P20).

4.7.3.7 Training and skills development

Career growth support needed to be reinforced with adequate training and skills capacitation. This, as recommended, could focus on Mentorships (P2, P14, P20), Leadership development, including for persons in positions (P13), Assisting people to learn and understand company structures and systems (P5) and Active talent management training (P14).

The subthemes under this theme were critical towards the development of a framework that explains the career trajectories of women towards senior leadership in HEIs in SA as per one of the study's aims. The recommendations made are a general emphasis on what appears to have been said in the past. The suggestions are captured in the works of Miscenko et al. (2017), Burkinshaw, and White (2017), Fusarelli et al. (2018) and Offermann et al. (2020), among others. This brings the argument that some of the solutions to women's challenges are generally known already but the will and perhaps the capacities for implementation might be weak.

4.8 STUDY'S PROPOSED FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE WOMEN IN HEIS CAREER PROGRESSION

As mentioned, one of the study's goals was to develop a framework that guides and can explain the career trajectories of women toward senior leadership in HEIs in SA. This section presents this framework that was developed from the study's constructivist grounded theory process. The basis of this framework is that career progression toward the senior-level leadership realm is a function of factors across three broad spheres, the personal, organisational, and societal spheres. These spheres are respectively reflected in Theme 1: Common narratives in career development trajectories, Theme 2: Succeeding at the micro or personal level, Theme 3: Succeeding at the organisational level, Theme 4: Succeeding against legacy and wider societal factors and Theme 5: Coping with the current situation and advancing women. These themes, as explained formed the basis for theoretical coding. Connections between and among these themes led to the development of the theory discussed herein.

Some sources like Sarwar and Imran (2019) and Dalati (2021) classify these factors as micro, meso and macro factors. The study's Theme 1 - *Common narratives in career development trajectories* highlights the gap between the desired versus the experienced career progression by mid-level HEI women. This is presented in the framework as a gap that interventions affecting the personal, organisational, and societal problematic areas attempt to cover. The primary agenda of this proposed framework is to close this gap, in the process, facilitating a movement from slow and stagnant current middle-level non-

academic leadership positions to senior-level positions. The group of interest in this transition are current non-academic women in South African HEIs. Figure 7 presents **Career framework for non-academic women in higher education.**

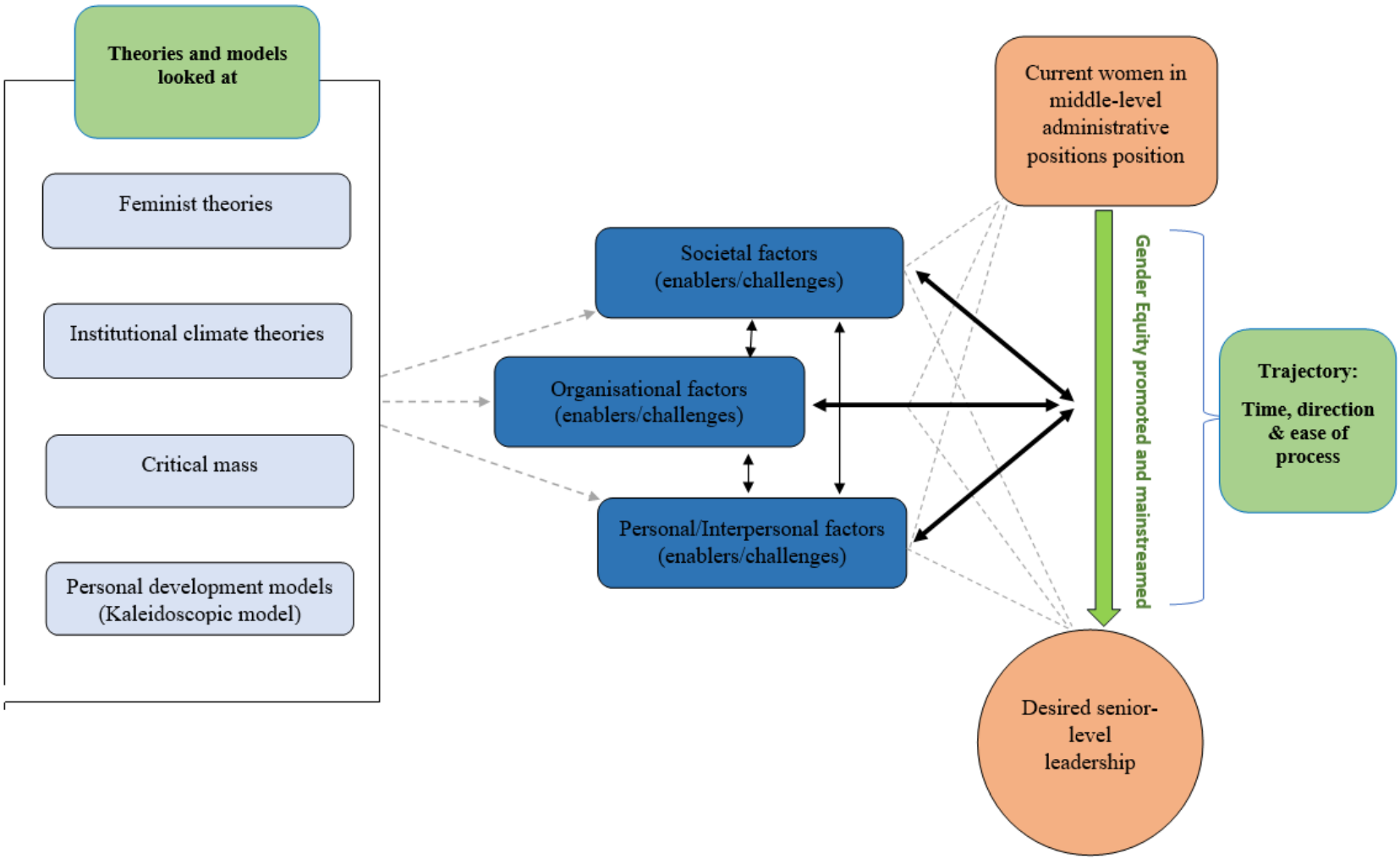

Figure 5: Career Framework for Mobility of Non-Academic Women In Higher Education

One of the major stages of constructive grounded theory is the theory-building stage. For this study, I present this stage under this section.

Looking at the model from left to right, four sets of theories were reviewed as part of the knowledge-building exercise. These were the feminist theories, institutional climate theories, critical mass theories and personal development models. The basis for the inclusion of these theories is the reality that much research has already been done on the career mobility of women in HEI environments – both academic and non-academic. While there are views that grounded theories do not depend on existing theories – but rather build new theories – there is an acceptance that new theories are not completely divorced from current knowledge. This knowledge too can be tapped in guiding interpretive and constructive purposes. However, such existing theories do not need to be tested in the new theoretical development process. I used the above theories as a basis to aid my own understanding of middle-level non-academic women's progression into executive leadership. Thus, I show by the use of arrows the areas of impact that these theories widely contributed to. They contributed to my understanding of the personal, organisational and societal factors behind **the mobility (or the lack of it) of non-academic women in higher education.**

4.8.1 Personal factors

The third column shows personal factors can act as an enabler of a hindrance in the mobility of non-academic women in higher education. The highlighted personal factors were knowledge, skills and capabilities, personal values and traits, and behaviours and actions. The presence of these factors facilitated and/or enabled greater mobility of non-academic women in HE. Their perceived and/or actual absence or inadequacy hinder career mobility. These factors were developed through focused coding and relooked at in the theoretical coding stage. Their general commonness is that they were manifested by the person.

Knowledge as a success factor: Knowledge emerged as one of the most important success factors and demands for non-academic women in higher education to

advance from middle to senior level: strategic organisational, higher education environments knowledge.

Soft skills: Time management, Patience, Problem-solving abilities, Work ethic, Emotional intelligence, Assertiveness, Flexibility, Empathy and Critical thinking.

Soft skills (Interpersonal): Communication, Motivational abilities, Diplomacy, Knowledge-sharing, Diversity-related interactions, understanding people, Networking, Political intelligence,

Hard skills required to succeed were: Technical skills, people knowledge, digital skills, report writing, data analytics, compliance and policy management, project management skills, general organisational skills, leadership competence and financial competence.

Personal values and traits were also thought to be important for success. These were communication, alignment of personal versus organisational values, honesty, accountability, client and people-oriented approach, proactivity, diversity, accountability, attention to detail and resilience.

4.8.2 Behaviours and actions including life-work balances

In the model, also as discussed under Theme 1, interpersonal factors can also account for the mobility of non-academic women in higher education. These factors mostly fell under Theme 2: Succeeding at the micro or personal level. They, therefore, connect Theme 2 to the model.

4.8.3 Organisational factors

Organisational factors were manifested throughout the organisation - as organisational cultures, systems, processes, actions and views. In addition, they were also manifested through organisational members. For example, lack of mentorship and skills development practices manifested as an organisational weakness. At a personal level, it showed

through poorly skilled employees who were not ready for challenges associated with higher leadership levels. In this study, these organisational factors were grouped into subthemes using focused coding. These were historical legacy and transformation, leadership, organisational politics/conflict, work-life balance organisation, work distribution, skills development and support.

Historical legacy and transformation: the factor that can enable the mobility (or the lack of it) of non-academic women in higher education if addressed. This demanded the removal of gender and racial stereotypes and glass ceilings that acted as barriers to career mobility.

Leadership: ineffective leadership that manifested as toxic, unsupportive, gender-skewed and bureaucratically closed, inhibited rather than enabled non-academic women's mobility (or the lack of it) in higher education. Such leadership was also associated with a poor skills development policy environment for women and a generally poor strategic orientation towards issues of gender equity in HEI. Leadership issues were also associated with work distribution issues that advantaged women as well as skills development environments.

Organisational politics/conflict: Organisational climate issues, specifically politics and conflict as theorised, created a tense environment that acted against the mobility of non-academic women in higher education. As highlighted, women were highly disadvantaged in such political affairs and conflicts due to male dominance in HEIs and male-gendered, patriarchy-driven cultures.

Unhealthy work-life balances: created by organisational demands were a hindrance to the mobility of non-academic women in higher education. Organisational policies that took note of the unique work-life balance challenges of women and worked towards addressing these, on the contrary, enabled career mobility.

In the analysis, these factors are mainly captured under Theme 3: Succeeding at the organisational level. They, therefore, connect Theme 3 to the model.

4.8.4 Societal factors

Societal factors were broadly defined as any sets of factors existing in societies that affected the mobility of non-academic women in higher education. These included prejudices, discrimination and stereotypes that existed in societies at large but permeated into the organisational systems. The factors captured in the theory were reclassified into discrimination, stereotypes, oppression and domination. These factors infiltrated HEI organisational systems and personal belief systems to reproduce hindrances behind the mobility of non-academic women in higher education.

In the analysis, these factors are mainly captured under Theme 4: Succeeding at the societal level. They, therefore, connect Theme 4 to the model.

4.8.5 Current versus desired level

In the model, bidirectional arrows from the personal, organisational and societal factors affecting the mobility of non-academic women in higher education point to the trajectory arrow (green). This is because the joint effect of these factors affects the participants' mobility, as explained. Depending on the favourability or non-favourability of personal, organisational, and societal factors, non-academic women in a HEI can find any position between their current and desired career growth levels. To reiterate, the current state is the middle-level managerial position of the interviewed participants. The desired level is a senior-level leadership position within the non-academic sections of HEI. As noted, some women like P1, P4, P9, P14 and P20 found themselves closer to their desired state than others, while others like P1, P6 and P19 found themselves excessively stuck to an undesired current state. These differences existed because different women were affected differently by the enablers and inhibitors.

The model borrows the concept of a trajectory from the natural sciences. A trajectory is the expected movement of an object from one point to another in a specific direction at a given speed and velocity. As indicated under Theme 1, women had expectations about (1) the desired point about their careers, (2) the direction of how to get there (What one needed to do to get there) and (3) the time it must take to get there. The last aspect -time was subjective and relative to each participant, although there were indications that 15

years without ascending into a senior leadership role was too long (Based on the timeframes they reported to have spent moving from the start of their careers to the current state). The current versus desired career levels for non-academic women in higher education were extracted from Theme 1: Common narratives in career development trajectories.

4.8.6 Interventions

Interventions to improve the trajectory, as highlighted under Theme 5, were required along the personal, organisational, and societal fronts. These were broadly summarised into gender equity and mainstreaming. The interventions were drawn from Theme 5: Coping with the current situation and advancing women and its subtheme - Advise to young professionals seeking career advancements and What HEIs could do to advance women's career advancements. Also, interventions were drawn or deduced from themes 1 to 4. Addressing the challenges revealed in these themes is a possible solution to the problematically slow and uncertain career trajectories.

The above framework, in summary, suggests the following:

- Women's career progression between the desired two points is a function of factors acting at the same time.
- The career is a journey from one point to another
- This progression is governed by personal time expectations – the expected number of years it should take to move along the trajectory.
- The movement can take varying directions – women's expected movements would be more direct rather than moving in circles between the two points.
- The movement's ease of process can also be subjectively assumed – women can assess whether their movement has been easy or difficult.
- To facilitate a move that is considered timeous, easy and in the right direction, all or most of the factors need to be supportive and enabling.
- When there are challenges, a multifactorial approach identifies the key factors operating at any given time and recommends their resolution.
- The framework is comparative – it can be used to assess male and female leader trajectories. The differences in time, direction, and effort as a function of the

interaction of the three factorial spheres would therefore be a quantifiable career progression gender gap between the two groups. This comparativeness however requires the quantitative modelling and testing of the framework which at this stage is beyond the study's scope but has been recommended as a critical area for further study.

The above framework could increase women's critical mass through the identification of problem and intervention areas that need attention as far as women's career progression is concerned.

The framework challenges the evaluation of more than one factor at a time when looking at career progression challenges. Often it is a combination of factors working together that is the problem. The study suggested that even when one has the desired personal factors and attributes that include a greater education and adequate skills and knowledge, organisational factors like bureaucracies may not facilitate their promotion towards senior leadership. The framework assumes that females being evaluated can give a perceived fair timeframe and ease of movement along the mid-level to senior-level leadership spectrum. The research anticipates that the framework will become a more quantitative model as more studies and tests are conducted. The variables identified above could be quantifiable benchmarks such as the average number of years one expects to stay in middle-level non-academic positions, which can be compared to current figures.

4.9 DISCUSSION OF STUDY'S FINDINGS VERSUS THEORIES EXAMINED

This section discusses the study's empirical findings versus theoretical arguments. The theories of interest were the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM), Bronfenbrenner's (1979) institutional climate theory, The Critical Mass Theory and the "Skewed" and "Tilted" Proportions of Group Life. The study looked at the feminist theory as the broad paradigmatic foundations upon which the other theories above were based. The feminist theory's broad argument was that gender was a key determinant of women's socioeconomic, cultural and political positions within organisational systems (Ferguson, 2017, Cudd 2022). The theory saw the intersectionality between gender and key

demographics of race, ethnicity, and religion as patriarchally skewed. The issue of patriarchy was a common challenge across both racial and ethnic lines. Within different racial and ethnic groups, women tended to experience the effects of patriarchy almost similarly. These patriarchal elements infiltrate the economic systems to the disadvantage of women (Cudd, 2022). The study found strong evidence of the realities of this theory in the interviews of HEI middle-career professionals.

4.9.1 Kaleidoscope Career Model

The framework above considers the study's findings across four themes, the three theories that were part of the study's theoretical framework and a career advancement model that was reviewed in the literature. The first theme *Common narratives in career development trajectories* – provided the finding that women's career trajectories intrinsically involve progressing from one stage to another, ideally within a predictively short or reasonable timeframe and with considerable ease. The above aspects of Theme 1 strongly mirror the needs of the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) by Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) which highlights the progression from one career stage to another as a need. This need however is subject to other factors and these are highlighted across the study's other four themes. In the model, most of the women's career progression narratives correspond with the middle stage of career progression depicted below:

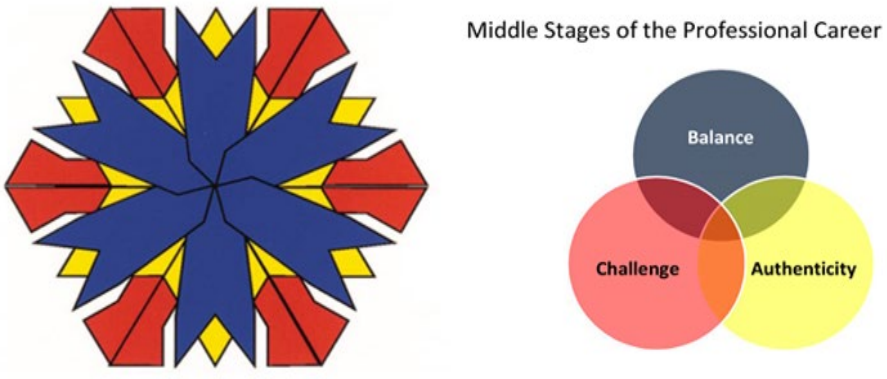

Figure 6: Kaleidoscope Career Model at Middle Management level

Some respondents mentioned the importance of balancing out their personal versus professional needs as part of career growth. The challenges of accepting new roles were

also explored. The less discussed matter was that of authenticity. The interviewed women did not doubt that they would lose their authenticity if they took up challenging positions. The model, however, does guide the importance of looking at the three elements when mapping out policies that guide women's career progression. As noted in the model provided above, the KCM factors are mostly considered to be highly effective at a personal level at which individual women make and decide to pursue their own developmental goals while taking into consideration the organisational level factors that affect their professional career balance, challenge and authenticity factors.

4.9.2 Bronfenbrenner's (1979) institutional climate

Looking at the study's findings from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) institutional climate perspective, the four spheres (micro, meso, macro and ex-macro) were represented in the findings in varying degrees. The study found that women viewed career progression as affected by personal, organisational and wider societal factors. These three were captured in themes two to three. The organisational sphere of career progression was mostly aligned to Bronfenbrenner (1979). The HEI organisation and the individual's personal background interact to form and influence their expectations of career progression. Some of the women were aware of how both racial and cultural backgrounds interacted with work demands and access to opportunities at the organisational level. The macro levels were captured to be broader socio-cultural environments dominated by hard-to-die patriarchal systems that were intertwined with racial innuendos. The study's findings, however, were not very explicit on the career growth dynamics that occurred in the exo and macro systems. Nonetheless, the theory like the study, acknowledges layers of factors that both progress and adversely affect one's career growth path. In the above model, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) spheres were collapsed into three (personal, organisational, and societal) based directly on the findings. The societal level encompasses all the wider elements outside the personal and organisational levels. These could be legal, economic and political factors, among others.

An essential difference between the study's findings and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory is that the study stresses the personal level's importance in career development. In the

study, women were aware that despite the challenges and barriers imposed by the organisational and societal environments, they wielded an element of control over their career success. They were aware that developing one's skills and personality, for instance, could help towards the attainment of personal career goals.

4.9.3 The critical mass theory

Some of the study's findings could be looked at from a critical mass theory discussed by various scholars, including Steinberg and Kincheleloe (2010) and Zembylas (2013). In the model, the critical mass theory was mostly applicable at the organisational level. At this level, leadership roles are assigned, and with these roles comes the behavioural aspects the theory attempts to predict – i.e., whether the critical mass was crucial for women's career progression.

Narratives from P4, P19 and P20, among others, strongly adhere to views expressed by both critics and proponents of the critical mass theory. There were views that there were not enough women leaders in HEIs to dislodge the patriarchal nature of leadership and its consequential gender-biased provision of employment, training, and promotion opportunities. It recurred that women saw the shortage of female mentors as a key challenge in their career progression. This view aligns with the critical mass theory that women will be in a better position to uplift each other in an organisation if they constitute a given percentage or proportion. P11 confirmed this, stating that being a woman in an executive position created loneliness risks, indicating a very low critical mass. At the same time, however, some respondents were doubtful that it was critical mass deficiencies that negatively affected career growth. Some women felt betrayed by other women in positions of power - particularly those who did not do anything to support the need for gender-balanced workplaces. In some instances, some women even saw men as being in a better position to uplift women in HEIs. Such arguments resonate with the views of Crowley (2004), who doubted the strength and capacity of the critical mass theory in explaining women's low representation in positions of power.

4.9.3.1 "Skewed" and "Tilted" *proportions of group life*

The "Skewed" and "Tilted" Proportions of Group Life by Kanter (1977) share interesting insights with the findings. From the theory, women seeking career advancement would be the tokens while the males are the dominants. The tokens were looked at from three aspects - visibility, polarisation, and assimilation. Starting with visibility, the theory argues that tokens were lowly visible in organisational systems. Their contributions and effects on the system were considered difficult to see. In the study, however, the women interviewed were highly confident of being a very visible force in the organisation. However, it was the lack of recognition from this visibility rather than the visibility itself that was a problem. Even when women performed exceptionally well and such performance was out for all to see, there was no guarantee that the patriarchal organisation systems would recognise this. Low visibility, as argued by Kanter (1977) generated performance pressure among women. They tended to overwork to achieve the same recognition as men. This view was captured in the findings as well. In addition, the findings revealed that such overwork scenarios clashed with work-life balances leading to several psychological pressures. Theme 4: *Coping with the current situation and advancing women* looked at potential solutions to stress challenges that women attempting to advance their careers faced.

Coming to polarisation, the male dominants did polarise women (from men) career seekers and this was explicitly brought out in almost all the interviews. The HEI organisational system at large, as perceived by the interviewees, had this problem. Finally, on the theory's assimilation effect, it also emerged that the HEI organisational system did assimilate a proportion of females into senior and executive leadership roles. As highlighted, these female leaders were faced with the dilemma of standing up for other women or sticking with the patriarchal systems of leadership. This dilemma links well with an earlier view of the critical mass argument that women leaders could easily choose to side with male leaders in the oppression of fellow women, compromising critical mass building in the process. The next section combines the various empirical and theoretical views from the study into a framework that guides women's progression in HEIs.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study titled **A Career Framework for Non-academic Middle Management Women in Higher Education Institutions in South Africa** was driven by the concerningly low proportions of women in executive non-academic positions in the South African higher education space. When the study's motivations were revisited, there was also concern that, despite being a widely discussed phenomenon, few studies examined this. Some argue that current studies provide insufficient information about what women in middle-level non-academic positions consider before pursuing senior leadership positions.

This study endeavoured to bridge the theoretical gap that existed because of limited research focus on the factors behind the transition from the middle management level towards the executive leadership level. At the same time, it understands that the mere progression to the middle management level itself is quite a challenge in a gendered higher education system.

The primary aim of the study was to discover and analyse personal stories detailing the experiences and professional advancement of women holding middle-level non-academic roles in higher education institutions (HEIs). These main objectives were then broken down into four secondary goals. These were as follows: (1) to review existing studies that provide insights into the narratives of women in higher education, identifying both factors contributing to their career success and those hindering their progress at the mid-level leadership positions, and to identify knowledge gaps in the field, elucidating how this research aims to address those gaps; (2) to investigate frameworks or theories concerning career development, with a particular focus on their impact on women; (3) to explore, describe, and elucidate the career development paths of women occupying middle-level non-academic roles in South African HEIs; and (4) to construct a comprehensive career development framework that sheds light on women's career trajectories toward senior leadership roles within South African higher education

institutions. This chapter concludes with the findings made for each of the sub-objectives. The chapter starts with a summary of findings made per each of the study's research questions before making appropriate recommendations.

5.2 THE STUDY'S KEY FINDINGS

As highlighted in Chapter 1, the study's objectives were broken down into five research questions. This section summarises the key findings made for each research question. These research questions were:

1. What are the personal and career journeys of women in middle-level non-academic positions in HEIs?
2. What challenges do women in middle-level non-academic positions experience in leadership?
3. What are the coping strategies that women in middle-level non-academic positions in HEIs have applied in their career journeys?
4. What programmes do HEIs have in place to accelerate the development of women at mid-level leadership?
5. What are the career ambitions of women in HEIs at mid-level leadership?
6. What career development framework can explain the career trajectories of women towards senior leadership in HEIs in SA?

The findings are presented below, starting with the first research questions. As noted in the methodology section and the previous chapter, the findings were facilitated by the use of constructive grounded theory, specifically, the themes that emerged through the CGT process and the final theoretical model that was developed from these themes.

5.2.1 What are the personal and career journeys of women in middle-level non-academic positions in HEIs?

The study found that women in middle-level non-academic positions (that in this study align with middle management roles) had varying career journeys that can be classified from their starting points as starting during the apartheid era, during the immediate post-

apartheid era and the current era. Regardless, gender and race are common identifiers that directly determine the pace and direction of one's career trajectory. Under Theme 1, the study showed that mid-leadership positions were a key point of stagnancy in one's journey toward senior leadership. This stagnancy in some instances lasted decades and with it came the debate of whether at some point one will eventually reach senior leadership or not. Women's career trajectories in HEI, as gathered from the interviews and across the themes, were longer than those of men.

5.2.2 What challenges do women in middle-level non-academic positions experience in leadership?

In their various journeys, the interviewed HEI women showed that they faced challenges at three levels of spheres all making it impossible or harder than expected to excel from their current mid-level positions to aspired senior-level positions. At the personal level, they faced skills, capabilities, and knowledge challenges as well as work-life balance challenges. Dealing with organisations and in their attempts to ascend through to the senior leadership level they faced transformational dilemmas, relational challenges with their leadership as well as bureaucracy, work politics and conflict, work quality issues and mentorship and skills development support deficits. There were views that current organisational systems were too gendered to facilitate a woman leader's smooth progression to senior leadership while they facilitated male ascension. The third group of challenges were legacy and societal challenges that included. Subservience/oppression, discrimination, and the problem of gender stereotypes were part of the challenges that were carried from the wider societal realms into HEIs as organisations. These were directed at them by male colleagues, but a number of participants experienced such practices from other female leaders who might have succeeded in moving into senior leadership. This brought a feeling of betrayal among mid-level women.

5.2.3 What are the coping strategies that women in middle-level non-academic positions in HEIs have applied in their career journeys?

Women's coping strategies have mostly centred on the attempts to stay relevant in one's career level while attempting to develop one's capabilities for senior positions. As

highlighted under Theme 2, women's career progression was a matter of identifying key success factors for such progression, developing them and hoping they were strong enough to dislodge the organisational and societal challenges that stunted one's career growth. From the study, one of the coping strategies, unfortunately, was gaining contentedness with one's current state and position owing to very slow and stagnant promotions. The second coping mechanism involved balancing off challenges that affected one's career growth by making informed sacrifices like choosing family over life. These were generally constrained choices that were part of mid-level women leaders' choice set. Another coping mechanism was directly challenging the status quo. Knowledge, training and skills development were considered critical tools to advance one's career even in the face of racial and patriarchal dynamics and women leaders expressed much commitment towards self-improvement through academic learning, training and mentorships. Nonetheless, facing challenges in these areas too, some resorted to individualised self-development or relied on peers for informal mentorships.

5.2.4 What programmes do HEIs have in place to accelerate the development of women at mid-level leadership?

From the interviews, there were views that HEIs interventional programmes towards the acceleration of women's development at the women in middle-level non-academic positions were mostly training and development related. Participants talked about the significance of leadership mentorship programmes albeit there were concerns that these were not as widely available as desired. Informal mentorships were not directly given by HEIs but were utilised by individuals to get the skills, knowledge, and traits they believed would drive them up towards senior leadership.

The HERS-SA is discussed as one of the available developmental interventions. While it is less mentioned in the interviews, it appears in the literature as a core feminist agenda-driven programme that realises that the development of women was not being hampered by skill and knowledge issues alone by the gendered patriarchal HEIs. As described HERS-SA works in partnership with Higher Education Institutions to support the gender equity agenda through their nomination of women to attend HERS-SA programs, posting

vacancies on the HERS-SA website and showcasing the achievements of women in their respective institutions. It, therefore, recognises the organisational and societal level's role in among other things slow or no career growth among women professionals in HEIs.

5.2.5 What are the career ambitions of women in HEIs at mid-level leadership?

As highlighted, the career ambitions of women in HEIs are among others to ascend to senior-level leadership. This is under the assumption that such a career progression resonates with women's social and family lives for some. For others, the ambitions are time-driven hoping to exert a more significant leadership impact on one's organisation sooner than later.

5.3 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS BY THEME

Through the application of constructive grounded theory, the study unveiled several thematic areas of interest. These areas are summarised in this section. The study highlighted five themes.

5.3.1 Theme 1: Common narratives in career development trajectories

Theme 1 focused on the common narratives in career development trajectories. It highlighted how the interviewed women in HEI generally navigated the career advancement landscapes at a personal level. A key element emerging under this theme was that of stagnancy in career growth - a concern about getting stuck in middle management or spending too long a time at this stage. It somehow reflected a view that for some, middle management was the furthest they felt they could go because of current gendered career progression dynamics.

5.3.2 Theme 2: Succeeding at the micro or personal level

Theme 2 was termed Succeeding at the micro or personal level, and this looked at the personal level critical success factors that women in HEIs needed to move towards senior leadership. The theme had subtopics on knowledge as a success factor, skills and capabilities, values and traits, behaviours and actions and work-life balances. It also

looked at skills knowledge and experience challenges that interfered with personal-level success factors.

5.3.3 Theme 3: Succeeding at the organisational level

Theme 3 looked at *Succeeding at the organisational level*. Its areas of interest were internal factors that advanced and impeded women in HEIs success – specifically their career trajectories towards senior leadership. Its thematic areas were Dealing with transformation issues, Organisational and leadership factors, Work politics and conflict, Work quality, volumes as a function of gender and Mentorship and skills development support.

5.3.4 Theme 4: Succeeding against legacy and wider societal factors

Theme 4 was Succeeding against legacy and wider societal factors, and it focused on how the organisational-level challenges and prejudices have been shaped by wider historical legacy and other external issues. The theme emerged from an acknowledgement that external prejudices, experiences, and belief systems percolate into the higher education environment adversely affecting women's career trajectories. The problems looked at are classified as subthemes and these were Betrayal as a reality; Subservience/oppression as an experience, Discrimination (race and gender) and the problem of gender stereotypes.

5.3.5 Theme 5: Coping with the current situation and advancing women

Theme 5 - Coping with the current situation and advancing women was concerned with identifying women in HEIs coping mechanisms amidst the adversities highlighted in Themes 1 to 4. It acknowledged the stressfulness of managing the personal, organisational and societal factors affecting career progression. Its subthemes were the role of and ability to manage work stress, Advise to young professionals seeking career advancements, and What HEIs could do to advance women's career advancements.

5.4 CONCLUSION

As found in the study, societal, organisational, and personal factors interact to affect mid-level HEI women leaders move from their current positions or state to the desired senior-level posts. The process could be perceived in one's experiences as easy and taking a shorter than expected time or difficult and taking a longer than expected time, among other combinations. The goal generally is to enable a smooth move that takes a fair level of time and effort when compared to the average ease with which men achieve similar moves. Societal factors, if supportive of gender equity, can be seen as enablers. In the study's case, they were mostly seen as challenges as they appeared to elongate one's progression from their career's starting point, to a desirable senior leadership position. Similarly, organisational factors also affect the timeframe, direction and perceived ease of this move. Personal factors include skills, knowledge, experience, work-life balance and others. As noted from the framework, the factors are interactive in nature. Societal factors, as argued, affect and influence organisational factors which influence personal factors associated with middle-management non-academic women's career progressions. For instance, one's skill set is a function of what the organisation desires and organisational prejudices emanate from broader societal patriarchal and gender-discriminating norms. Hopefully, I conclude that with the model I have co-created with the participants, it will become possible to address the challenges and barriers that dominate the participants' career progression narratives.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations flowing from this study are presented by the three levels of broad factors discussed in the data analysis and discussion sections and also further built upon by the study's career development framework that explains career trajectories of women towards senior leadership in HEIs in SA. These are the personal, organisational and societal level factors.

5.5.1 Recommendations to women professionals in HEIs

The following recommendations are made for HEIs:

5.5.1.1 Identify, develop, and update CSFs for senior leadership

Women aspiring to move from mid-level to senior-level leadership positions in HEIs need to keep track of the critical success factors required of such a move. Further to that they should work towards developing and communicating their possession of such skills.

5.5.1.2 Normalise work-life balances

The struggle for work-life balance is notable among the most persistent issues in women in HEIs career progression. Women should not be forced to choose either one or the other. Rather, this balance should be recognised as a “normal” scenario whose accommodation in policies must be lobbied for. There should be support for this uniqueness rather than attempts to minimise the interactions between family and work life.

5.5.1.3 Avoid the adverse unethical practices that promise success

As noted, career progression in some instances demanded making unethical choices that included joining the unethical male practices and entering equally unethical competitive bids with fellow women. As recommended, women should avoid making moral sacrifices to progress towards senior leadership. The focus should be on creating equal grounds upon which women can succeed as senior HEIs leaders.

5.5.1.4 Stand as a group and support each other

Career stagnation among women in middle-level non-academic positions is a manifestation of gender inequalities in larger societies. As a result, unified approaches that challenge both the organisational and societal systems are required. These requirements necessitate group rather than individual approaches. At the same time, women in higher education must help each other grow, including through peer-to-peer and informal mentorships. This expands the pool of senior leadership-capable women available to HEIs.

5.5.2 Recommendations to HEIs

The following recommendations are made for HEIs:

5.5.2.1 Design career development guidelines as part of succession planning

Institutions are encouraged to develop career development policies that specifically address progression trajectories. Initially, this necessitates recognising career stagnation among women in middle-level non-academic positions and other positions as a human resources challenge. The plans should include average paths and timeframes for professionals to move along career trajectories. In addition, monitoring mechanisms in the plans should detect and investigate irregular movements along such paths, including movements motivated by race or gender.

5.5.2.2 Adequate formalised leadership mentorship

Mentorships were identified as a critical tool for developing the necessary senior leadership skills. At the same time, based on the participants' experiences, these were not widely and easily available. HEIs should make more formalised mentorship programs available. These programs must be structured and monitored to ensure that they transfer the qualities required for senior-level leadership success.

5.5.2.3 Cultural transformation

HEIs require urgent cultural transformation to rid institutions of dominant patriarchal systems that impede women's advancement to senior leadership positions. In other words, cultures that normalise women's leadership were required. Cultural transformations are also recommended, pointing out that even in the presence of gender equality policies, change has been slow for women, implying that organisational cultures were not evolving quickly enough to align with gender equity policy changes.

5.5.2.4 Organisational structural transformations

Noting that bureaucracy is associated with drawn-out, male-dominated structures, the researcher recommends that organisational structures be transformed away from excessively tall bureaucratic structures and toward flatter, networked structures as part of the challenge to women's movement to senior leadership positions in HEIs. The latter can accommodate more balanced senior leadership positions, giving women more

opportunities. Network structures will also eliminate information flow issues associated with women's slow career advancement in higher education.

5.5.2.5 Leadership quota systems

Leadership quota systems that attempt to balance the leadership composition of HEIs by race and gender should be enforced. Noting that current systems are failing to accommodate women despite desirable proportions of senior leadership, quotas will force systems to first support skill development among women leaders and then position them in roles that reflect their deserved career growth.

The following recommendations stem directly from **Theme 5's** *What HEIs could do to advance women's career advancements subtheme.* The researcher sees these as relevant and practical hence their inclusion:

5.5.2.6 Addressing adverse organisational practices

As women aspiring to higher offices were frequently hampered by negative and unfair leadership and management practices, addressing such practices through negative and positive reinforcement could help women advance in their careers. These included the elimination of micromanagement practices, excessive work burdens on women, and significant administrative and supervisory burdens.

5.5.2.7 Research and information

It was recommended that HEI produce and disseminate information on women's work struggles, including struggles and challenges encountered in their systems. This would provide a substantial amount of data to guide internal policies and programs aimed at assisting women's development.

Researchers can delve into the critical mass theory to understand how reaching a certain percentage of women in leadership positions can bring about substantive change. This involves examining the dynamics and effects of having a critical mass of women in decision-making roles.

HEIs should Identify barriers by conducting in-depth research to identify the specific barriers that hinder women's progress in moving from middle-level non-academic positions to senior-level leadership roles. This may include cultural, institutional, and structural barriers.

Institutions should apply critical theory to analyse and interpret the social and cultural factors that contribute to gender-based discrimination and inequality. This involves questioning the norms and practices that perpetuate gender disparities.

5.5.2.8 Support diversity

Another set of recommendations was for HEIs to promote workforce diversity. This includes encouraging and supporting cultural and religious diversity, as well as recognising the multiculturalism of women in higher education. This could be accomplished by removing stereotypes as people advance to positions of leadership.

5.5.3 Wider societal-level recommendations

The following recommendations are made at the societal level:

5.5.3.1 Continuous improvement in implementing gender equity and equality policies

The researcher advocates for continuous improvement in implementing gender equality policies, laws, and regulations. The current state of career stagnation among women in higher education reflects the reality that equality laws require continuous improvement to ensure effective implementation and enforcement. Furthermore, such advancements must consider how some equality and equity laws and policies exclude other groups that were previously disadvantaged by gender, specifically white women.

5.5.3.2 Managing gender stereotypes at the societal level

It is critical to overcome the problem of stereotyping females as professionals best suited for low or middle-level leadership positions. Societal education that begins with a basic education could aid in the dismantling of long-held stereotypes, some of which exist among women themselves.

HEIs can collaborate with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women's groups, and other organisations that advocate for gender equality to amplify efforts and share resources. This can include organizing events, conferences, and forums that provide opportunities for women in HEIs to network, share experiences, and learn from successful leaders.

5.5.3.3 Providing leading examples at the governmental level

A national leadership structure that reflects South Africa's gender structures could help women advance in their careers. A national leadership comprised of more senior female leaders in both the political and administrative spheres would serve to inspire acceptance of equal structures within HEIs and the societal stakeholders of HEIs.

5.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This section recommends further research that will advance academia and society's knowledge and understanding of women in middle-level non-academic positions and women in HEIs' pursuit of senior-level leadership positions.

- Quantitative studies that can model the trajectories of women in middle-level non-academic positions while also testing the applicability of the framework developed for this study. These would quantify the scope and gravity of the problem in South Africa.
- Studies that investigate the factors that contribute to resistant patriarchal systems in higher education, including racial patriarchies despite the existence of national equality policies and laws, as well as organisational-level systems aimed at eradicating these. This will provide important answers to important questions about why inequalities persist despite the existence of numerous laws affecting HEIs.
- The studies investigate the ethical quandaries that women in HEIs face on their paths to leadership positions, and how these affect women's upliftment movements in South Africa. Such studies are thought to be worthwhile because women are forced to engage in negative behaviours such as "burning bridges" on their way to the top. It was also discovered that some male-dominated unethical

organisational systems demanded equally unethical behaviour from women who wanted to fit in and succeed in them.

- Studies that examine the effects of HEIs' organisational and cultural systems on women's career advancement are also recommended.

5.7 FINAL WORD

This study produced significant findings and contributions to our understanding of women in mid-level leadership pursuing senior-level positions in higher education. While many opinions were expressed, one general conclusion can be drawn: the transition from middle-level to senior-level management is difficult, time-consuming, and exhausting for women in HEIs. While these women were aware of and attempted to develop critical success factors that should have empowered them in this move, the presence of forces whose strength and influence outweighed these factors turned the process into a struggle for balance. Even with critical success factors such as the required skills, knowledge, and experience, including networking capacities, the internal politicisation, patriarchisation, and bureaucratisation of career advancement in HEIs made the process long and winding, and in many cases created a glass ceiling that women believed they could never break through. All of this occurred in the presence of race and gender equity and equality laws. Higher education institutions are generally expected to have high intellectual standards and thus accept positive change. However, the situation described by the women interviewed casts serious doubt on this expectation. A higher education environment in which women are not empowered by capacity-driven critical success factors but by archaic traditions and patriarchal systems that societies are ridding themselves of represents a hidden backwardness that must be addressed. As its primary, novel contribution, the study provided a framework that could aid the career progression of women in middle-level non-academic positions into senior positions in the face of challenges.

In Chapter One, I discussed how my personal and professional experiences as a woman administrator led me to choose this research topic. Through conducting this study and listening to the stories of other women in similar positions, I came to understand that the

challenges I encountered in my own career journey were not unique and could be overcome. This realisation allowed me to appreciate my current phase and recognise that every woman's career trajectory is unique and influenced by various factors. Additionally, I learned to align my personal and professional goals and persist in pushing forward, despite barriers, as sustained effort is key to success. Overall, the findings presented in this chapter provided me with a reflection on my own journey and served as a valuable source of inspiration.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE

17 June 2021

Ref #: 2021_SBL_DBL_006_FA
Name of applicant: Mrs M Lengane
Student #: 72449810

Dear Mrs Lengane

Decision: Ethics Approval

Student: Mrs M Lengane, (lengamsm@unisa.ac.za , 072 307 6898)

Supervisor: Prof V Naidoo, (NaidooV@tut.ac.za, 082 561 6955)

Project Title: Considerations by women at mid-level leadership in pursuance of senior-level leadership positions in higher education

Qualification: Doctor of Business Leadership (DBL)

Expiry Date: May 2023

Thank you for applying for research ethics clearance, SBL Research Ethics Review Committee reviewed your application in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics.

Outcome of the SBL Research Committee:
Approval is granted for the duration of the Project

The application was reviewed in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics by the SBL Research Ethics Review Committee on the 15/06/2021.

The proposed research may now commence with the proviso that:

1) The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached
2) The researcher/s will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and

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SBL GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS LEADERSHIP UNISA

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principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.

3) Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study, as well as changes in the methodology, should be communicated in writing to the SBL Research Ethics Review Committee.
4) An amended application could be requested if there are substantial changes from the existing proposal, especially if those changes affect any of the study-related risks for the research participants.
5) The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study.

Kind regards,

NBW MLitwa

Prof N Mlitwa

Chairperson: SBL Research Ethics Committee

011 - 652 0000/ wiltonb@unisa.ac.za

Prof P Msweli

Executive Dean: Graduate School of Business Leadership

011- 652 0256/mswelp@unisa.ac.za

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APPENDIX B: PERMISSIONS TO CONDUCT STUDY

UNISA university of south africa

RESEARCH PERMISSION SUB-COMMITTEE (RPSC) OF THE SENATE RESEARCH, INNOVATION, POSTGRADUATE DEGREES AND COMMERCIALISATION COMMITTEE (SRIPCC)

14 July 2022

Decision: Permission approval 14 July 2022 to 31 May 2023

Ref #: 2022_RPC_048
Mrs Masentle Lengane
Student #: 1127934
Staff #:

Principal Investigator:

Mrs Masentle Lengane
Employment Equity Division Leadership & Transformation Department
UNISA
lengamsm@unisa.ac.za; 0723076898

Supervisor: Prof Vinessa Naidoo; naidoov@tut.ac.za; 082 561 6955

Considerations by women at mid-level leadership in pursuance of senior-level leadership positions in higher education in SA

Your request for permission to involve UNISA employees, students and data regarding the above study has been received and was considered by the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC) of the UNISA Senate, Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee (SRIPCC) on 14 July 2022.

It is my pleasure to inform you that permission has been granted for the study. You may invite mid-management HERS-SA alumni employed at Unisa for interviews. It was noted that approximately 20 woman for the entire study will be included.

You may also include mid-management HERS-SA alumni employed at Unisa to form part of three focus groups. It was noted that approximately 12 woman in three focus groups for the entire study will be included.

University of South Africa
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It was also noted that HERS-SA granted permission to provide you with a list of HERS-SA alumni.

Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be promoted: " Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible."
The personal information made available to the researcher(s)/gatekeeper(s) will only be used for the advancement of this research project as indicated and for the purpose as described in this permission letter. The researcher(s)/gatekeeper(s) must take all appropriate precautionary measures to protect the personal information given to him/her/them in good faith and it must not be passed on to third parties. The dissemination of research instruments through the use of electronic mail should strictly be through blind copying, so as to protect the participants' right of privacy. The researcher hereby indemnifies UNISA from any claim or action arising from or due to the researcher's breach of his/her information protection obligations.

You are requested to submit a report of the study to the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC@unisa.ac.za) within 3 months of completion of the study.

Note: *The reference number **2022_RPC_048** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants and the Research Permission Subcommittee.*

We would like to wish you well in your research undertaking.

Kind regards,

Dr Retha Visagie – Deputy Chairperson
Email: visagrg@unisa.ac.za, Tel: (012) 429-2478

Prof Lessing Labuschagne – Chairperson
Email: llabus@unisa.ac.za, Tel: (012) 429-6368

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APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

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(Unisa ethical clearance nr: 2022_RPC_0048).

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

A career framework for non-academic middle management women in higher education institutions in South Africa

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is Masentle Lengane and I am doing research under the supervision of Professor V Naidoo, at the Graduate School of Business Leadership towards a Doctor of Business Leadership at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled "**A career framework for non-academic middle management women in higher education institutions in South Africa**"
".

The aim of this study is to investigate how gender has an impact on women's leadership lived experiences and aspirations. The experiences of women in mid-level positions should provide some comprehension into the career path for senior-level leadership in HE.

You were selected to participate in this study as employee in a HEI and occupying a mid-level leadership position. You hold or have held a middle-level leadership position in a HEI in the past five years. I anticipate to interview about 20 women. As a HERS-SA alumni and part of their network, your contact details were provided by HERS-SA office.

Your role in the study would be to avail yourself for a one-on-one interview with me via MS Teams or Zoom platform. The study involves semi-structured interviews. I will ask questions about your background, childhood and school experiences as well as your career journey. I have attached the questions that I will be asking for you to scan through and establish if you would be comfortable to answer them. I will need an hour of your time to conduct the interview and a possible telephonic follow up. There may be a need to have a follow up interview via telephone for me to seek clarity or any issues that I may come across as I transcribe the interview.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and that there is no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. Being in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

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There are no potential foreseeable risks to the participants in the study. Participants will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used in the study. Your name will not be recorded anywhere and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give.

Your answers will be given a fictitious code number or a pseudonym and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. *I will transcribe the data myself and should there be need to use the services on third parties, these individuals will sign confidentiality agreements.* Your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including a transcriber, external coder, and members of the Research Ethics Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records.

Your anonymous data may be used for other purposes, e.g. research report, journal articles, conference presentation, etc. *(A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report).* Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of 5 years in a locked cupboard in my home for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password protected personal computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable.

There are no payments for participating in this study. You will not bear any costs for participating in this study.

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the College of Economic and Management Sciences, UNISA. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Masentle Lengane on 072 307 6898 or lengamsm@unisa.ac.za. The findings will be accessible in 2023. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Prof Vinessa Naidoo, NaidooV@tut.ac.za

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.

Masentle Lengane

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

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GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS LEADERSHIP (SBL)

Informed consent for participation in an academic research project
A career framework for non-academic middle management women in higher education institutions in South Africa

Dear Respondent

You are herewith invited to participate in an academic research study conducted by **Masentle Lengane**, a student in the Doctor of Business Leadership at UNISA's Graduate School of Business Leadership (SBL). ***Unisa ethical clearance nr: 2022_RPC_0048).***

My name is Masentle Lengane, and I am doing research with Professor V Naidoo, at the Graduate School of Business Leadership towards a Doctor of Business Leadership at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study titled "**A career framework for non-academic middle management women in higher education institutions in South Africa**".

The aim of this study is to investigate how gender has an impact on women's leadership lived experiences and aspirations. The experiences of women in non-academic mid-level positions should provide some comprehension of the career path for senior-level leadership in HE.

You were chosen to take part in this study because you work for a HEI and are a woman in a mid-level leadership position that is not academic. Within the last five years, you have had or now occupied a middle-level leadership role in a HEI. I plan to speak with roughly 20 women. Your contact information was given to me by the HERS-SA office since you are a member of their network and an alumnus of HERS-SA.

Your participation in the study would involve making yourself available for a one-on-one interview with me over the MS Teams or Zoom platform. Semi-structured interviews are used in the study. I'll ask you about your background, your experiences in education, as well as your professional development. You can review the questions I'll be asking in the attachment to see if you feel comfortable answering them. Your time will be needed for the interview and possibly a follow-up phone call for an hour. If I run into any questions or problems when transcribing the interview, we may need to conduct a follow-up telephone interview.

If you choose not to participate in this study, there will be no consequences or benefits lost. You are under no obligation to consent to involvement in this study, and participation is entirely voluntary. You will be given this information sheet to retain and asked to sign a written consent form if you choose to participate. You have the right to renounce at any moment and without providing a justification.

There are no known or potential dangers to research participants. Pseudonyms will be used in the study, and participant information will be kept private. No one will be able to link your replies to you, and your identity won't be recorded anywhere.

Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa PO Box 392 Unisa 0003 South Africa
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Email: sbl@unisa.ac.za Website: www.sblunisa.ac.za

Your responses will be referenced by a made-up code number or pseudonym in the data, any publications, or other research reporting techniques like conference proceedings. If I need to use the services of third parties, they will sign confidentiality agreements, and I will manually transcribe the data. People in charge of ensuring that research is conducted ethically, such as a transcriber, an outside coder, and members of the Research Ethics Committee, may examine your responses. Unless you grant permission for other persons to view the records, information that identifies you will otherwise only be accessible to those involved in the study.

Your anonymized information might also be used for other things, such as research reports, journal articles, conference presentations, etc (A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report). For future research or academic purposes, the researcher will keep hard copies of your responses in a secured cabinet in my office for a period of five years; electronic data will be kept on a password-protected computer. Future uses of the saved data will be governed by additional Research Ethics Review and, if necessary, approval.

There are no rewards for taking part in this research. You won't be charged anything to take part in this study.

The School of Business Leadership Research Ethics Review Committee (GSBL CRERC), UNISA, has approved this study. If you have any inquiries or comments about the study, kindly get in touch with Professor V Naidoo at naidoov@tut.ac.za, who is my supervisor.

Please sign below to confirm that you are willing to take part in the study.

Yours sincerely

Masentle Lengane

I, _____(respondent), I thus offer my permission to take part in the study. I've read the letter and am aware of my rights in relation to taking part in the study.

_____ _____

Respondent's signature **Date**

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Ref#: 2022_RPC_048

ANNEXURE 5: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Thank you for your time and for agreeing to participate in my study. The main research question: "What are the factors that impact on the lived experiences and career journeys of women at mid-leadership with aspirations to occupy senior leadership positions in HEI in South Africa?"

The findings of the study will be used to create a theoretical framework that women can use to help advance their careers in HEIs. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time, should you no longer wish to continue. You can also choose not to answer questions which you are not comfortable answering.

The following questions will guide the interview process:

1. Can you walk me through your resume and tell me about the jobs and experiences that have led you to your present position?
2. What factors are critical for success in your current position?
3. What particular hard and soft skills are important to be an effective university leader?
    a. How did you come to develop your skills?
4. If you have/had a mentor, how did that relationship come to be? (formal or informal mentor?)
    a. What role, if any, has mentorship played on your professional career path?
5. Can you tell me about the biggest professional challenges you have faced along your career journey?
    a. How, if at all, has your being a woman affected your professional advancement?
6. What personal factors may facilitate your career advancement?
7. How did your employer support your career advancement? What support for women at mid-level management would fast tack women advancement to higher positions in HE?
8. What personal factors may militate against your promotion?
9. How do you cope with stresses and strains in your job?
10. What advice would you give to women considering to become leaders in HEIs?

Closing

Is there anything you would like to restate or mention before we wrap up? Do you have any final thoughts or questions?

Thank you for your time and sharing your experiences, I appreciate your honesty and will respect your privacy.

Thank you.

APPENDIX F: TURNITIN REPORT SUMMARY

turnitin

Digital Receipt

This receipt acknowledges that Turnitin received your paper. Below you will find the receipt information regarding your submission.

The first page of your submissions is displayed below.

Submission author:	Masentle Salome Mamokone LENGANE
Assignment title:	COMPLETE proposal/thesis for examination
Submission title:	A CAREER FRAMEWORK FOR NON-ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANA...
File name:	FINAL_THESIS_submission3_14112023.docx
File size:	1.37M
Page count:	162
Word count:	47,157
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Submission date:	14-Nov-2023 12:56AM (UTC+0200)
Submission ID:	2223317211

A CAREER FRAMEWORK FOR NON-ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGEMENT WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

ORIGINALITY REPORT

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APPENDIX G: DECLARATION OF PROFESSIONAL EDITING

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LANGUAGE EDITOR'S CERTIFICATE

This certificate is to certify that ABISHA KAMPIRA has provided language editing services for a PhD. thesis titled -

A CAREER FRAMEWORK FOR NON-ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGEMENT WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

By

MASENTLE LENGANE (7211934).

The editor has carefully reviewed the manuscript for grammar, punctuation, syntax, and overall clarity. They have also worked on improving the thesis' structure and flow.

The editor's work did not include verifying the correctness, originality and completeness of the information that formed the thesis.

Date: 14 November 2023

Signature: 

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